

Homiletical Helps: Three Advent Sermon Studies

Isaiah Pictures the Coming Messiah

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I

Isaiah Pictures the Coming Messiah as a Lowly Shoot from the Stump of Jesse

John C. Jeske

This series of Advent sermon studies will let the prophet Isaiah speak. Seven centuries before the birth of Christ, Isaiah pictured the coming Messiah for his hearers and readers. The three Isaiah texts chosen for this series picture the Messiah

1. as a lowly shoot from the stump of Jesse (11:1, 2);
2. as a champion bringing deliverance to God's people (9:2-7);
3. as a light for the Gentiles (49:5-7).

Isaiah 11:1, 2

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse.” Three centuries before Isaiah wrote these words, the royal line of great King David had been an impressive and a powerful one. David was without a doubt the most famous king Israel ever had, and his royal house provided kings for the nation of Israel for 350 years. At David's time, this royal house resembled a tall tree.

A thousand years after the time of David, however, at the time Christ was born, the ax of God's judgment had cut that tree down. About twenty of David's descendants had served as kings in Jerusalem, but many of them had abused their high office. Many ruled selfishly instead of in the interest of God's people. Some were idolaters and actually led the people of Israel into false worship.

And then God's judgment struck. The once powerful nation of Israel was torn apart by civil war. Israel was invaded by powerful enemy nations. Her beautiful capital city was trashed and then torched, and the brightest and best of her people were led off into captivity a thousand miles away from home. Only a handful returned seventy years later.

You could not really call that a proud tree, could you? All that was left was a stump of what had once been a great tree. At the time Christ came to earth there was no descendant of King David on the throne in Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, that royal house had fallen so far that Isaiah doesn't even call it the house of David; he calls it by the name of David's father.

And then, miraculously, a tiny shoot sprouted from that decaying stump. The prophet Jeremiah helps us to understand that the shoot referred to here is not a piece of wood but a person: “The days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely, and do what is just and right in the land.... This is the name by which he will be called, The LORD our Righteousness” (Jr 23:5f). The lowly shoot from the stump of Jesse is great David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus.

What does all this say about the background from which our Savior came? Really, there was nothing very impressive about the Jewish nation at the time Christ was born. It had long since lost its independence; it was only a puppet of the great Roman empire. Isaiah's prophecy pictures the Messiah for us in terms we will do well to remember as we plan our Christmas celebration. The most famous descendant of the royal house of

David came from a lowly background, from a conquered and captive nation. He was born not in a palace, but in a stable, to a young lady from the line of David who was engaged to a carpenter from the line of David. But don't misunderstand his lowliness. That lowly shoot from the stump of Jesse is your Lord; he is Lord of all. In order to trade places with us he laid aside the power and position he had and became the lowliest servant.

A mistake many Christians make in celebrating Christmas is that of spending too much time on the unimportant circumstances surrounding the Christ Child's birth. By contrast St. Paul, who has much to say about what Christmas means for us, never says a thing about the stable and the manger and the diapers and the fact that there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn. A God-pleasing celebration of Christ's birth will look away from the unimportant details and concentrate instead on the miracle God accomplished through that birth. Isaiah helps us to see what miracles are involved.

"A Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, and the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD." Although he came from a lowly background, the miraculous shoot from the stump of Jesse is equipped by God to bring gifts to God's people.

"The Spirit of the LORD will rest upon him." That Spirit would be the Spirit, first of all, of wisdom. There is some wisdom you can learn from books. There is some wisdom you can learn from your own experience. There is another kind of wisdom, however, which only the Spirit of God can teach a person. Think of the harsh message of God's law he brought to the religious leaders of the Jews, who imagined that with their performance they had lived up to the requirements of God's law and had earned a right to membership in his family. Think of the wisdom Christ had to offer the penitent prostitute, or the disciple who in front of a coal fire had sworn he didn't even know Christ. The wisdom Christ brings is the wisdom we can't find anywhere else: the wisdom of knowing that sin has been forgiven, the wisdom of knowing what makes life worth living and death worth dying.

The lowly shoot from the stump of Jesse comes with gifts for God's people. Wisdom is one such gift. Power is another. The Infant whose birth we are about to celebrate may have appeared to be a helpless child, but he has the power to perform miracles. Because he is the God-man, he could do the things that were necessary if the sinful human race was to be saved.

History records many examples of how power can be abused. Fifty years ago in Nazi Germany a tremendous amount of power was concentrated in the hands of a few leaders, and a whole world suffered because of the way those men abused their power. That is why it is important to know of one final gift the promised Savior brings his people. Isaiah describes that gift in the words: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him ... the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD."

Jesus had a holy respect for the will of his Father and an iron determination to carry it out. Already as a twelve-year old he asked his parents: "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" That holy respect for the will of his Father was what made Christ's work as our Savior successful.

Although he comes from a lowly background, he comes with gifts for God's people: wisdom and power and the fear of the LORD. No wonder Isaiah could say: "A shoot will come up ... a Branch will bear fruit." Some of the fruit the shoot from the stump of Jesse has produced is in evidence in this midweek Advent service. A group of God's sons and daughters took time out of their busy schedules to sit at Jesus' feet and hear his Word, and to confess their faith in the miraculous shoot from the stump of Jesse. As a result of the Savior's work, there are fathers who have not forgotten that their role as heads of the family is to take the lead in loving, self-giving service to the other members of the family. There are mothers and homemakers who show the fruit of the Savior's work by thinking of their homes not as storage sheds or combination restaurant-motels, but places where the love of Jesus Christ is apparent. The fruit of the Savior's work is apparent in the lives of children when they realize that life is not for kicks, but for the glory of God.

The information Isaiah here gives about the Messiah may be summarized in the following outline:

The Lowly Shoot from the Stump of Jesse is Your Lord

- I. *Although he comes from a lowly background,*
 - A. The royal house of David had fallen under God's judgment.
 - B. The Messiah had no beauty, and was despised and rejected by men.
- II. *He comes with gifts for God's people.*
 - A. Wisdom
 1. God-given
 2. Enabling him to diagnose and remedy our sin-problem
 - B. Power (to carry out his wise plans)
 - C. Fear of the Lord
 1. Holy respect for the Father's will
 2. Determination to carry it out

II

Isaiah Pictures the Coming Messiah as a Champion who Brings Deliverance

Wayne D. Mueller

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. 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. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, and will be fuel for the fire. 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. Of the increase 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.

The beautiful pictures Isaiah paints with the names he gives the coming Messiah in verse 6 are the heart of this text. They provide the frame-work on which any sermon on this pericope must be constructed. Here he sketches a Champion who fights and wins and rules for his people.

A champion who takes the field of battle on behalf of others is first of all one who is qualified to fight the enemy he will engage. The couplet at the beginning of verse 6 indicates one aspect of our Savior's qualification to do battle for us against sin: "To us a child is born, to us a son is given."

Jesus was truly man, born of a virgin (Is 7:14; Lk 2:7). He was born under law (Ga 4:6; Lk 2:21-24, 51); he suffered and died (Is 53). Yet this same child and son is called "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father" (v 6). He is Immanuel, God with us (Is 7:14; Mt 1:23), God made flesh (Jn 1:14; Ga 4:6), eternally one with God (Ps 2:7; He 1:5-9; Mic 5:2; Jn 10:30). Our Champion is one of us and one with God. He is qualified to be our substitute on the field of battle. He is capable of fighting for us and winning. Jesus is the great and dawning light (Jn 1:4, 5; 8:12; 2 Pe 1:19) Isaiah is picturing in verse 2.

Isaiah adds more details to his portrait of our Champion. Not only is he qualified as the God-man to fight and win for us; Isaiah paints him as having already won our peace with an accomplished victory in battle. The prophetic Hebrew perfects he employs inspire confidence in the surety of God's promises seven hundred years before the historical event (Is 53:5; Lk 19:42).

Isaiah's immediate audience did not have peace in any shape or form. Political peace was denied by the imposing specter of the Assyrian army. Spiritual peace was nonexistent among an apathetic, immoral and idolatrous people. What a beautiful promise that their coming Champion would be called the "Prince of Peace"!

Repeatedly Isaiah had to warn Judah that there is no peace for the wicked (48:22; 57:21). There was no peace which a sinful people could secure for themselves. But his gospel promise is that what they could not

attain by any effort on their part God would give them through the Messiah. The Champion, the Prince of Peace, would bring an end to the warfare between an angry God and a stubbornly sinful people. Verses 4 and 5 picture the end of enmity and strife, and verses 6 and 7 give the reason why the warfare is finished. Isaiah could announce comfort in the name of the Champion Messiah (40:1, 2).

The fine details of the panoramic vision of the Champion are sketched in by the name “Wonderful Counselor” and in verses 3 and 7. The Messiah would not only fight to win peace, he would rule to insure that the peace was not lost. “The government will be on his shoulders” (v 6), and “of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end” (v 7).

But the way in which the Messiah will rule and govern to insure peace will be unlike the cruel rule of worldly authorities. Jesus will bring peace through his work as Counselor. From the right hand of God he will comfort his people with the assurance of his completed victory and send them out as ambassadors of his peace to all the world (Mt 28:18–20). That is how he will increase his government (v 7) and enlarge his nation (v 3). His justice (v 7) is justification (Ro 5:1) and his righteousness (v 7) is that which he imputes to us by faith (Ro 4:6, 8, 11, 22–24). His kingdom flourishes by the wonderful counseling of the peace of forgiveness which he ministers to and through his subjects.

Outline

Introduction:

The many commercial and ornamental lights of Christmas cannot dispel the deep shadow cast across our nation and over our own consciences by sin. We need a hero, a champion, who can brighten our lives long after artificial Christmas lighting has been taken down. What we need God pictured many years ago through his prophet Isaiah. The second of Isaiah’s portraits of the coming Savior is that of a Champion, a Champion who fights and wins and rules. Our Champion is qualified to fight for us, wins to bring us peace and rules to make sure that we never lose our peace.

The Messiah Is a Champion Who Brings Deliverance to God’s People

I. Our Champion is qualified to fight for us.

A. The qualifications of a true champion are:

1. That he be like us, one of us, able to take our place, be our substitute;
2. That he be unlike us, that he be greater and stronger than we are and that he not possess our weaknesses.

B. Our Champion is one of us, a child and a son.

C. Our Champion is true God, unlike us, sinless and powerful, Mighty God and Everlasting Father.

D. Our Champion is qualified to rescue people walking in darkness and living in the land of the shadow of death.

II. Our Champion wins to bring us peace.

A. God’s people at Isaiah’s time were not able to win peace for themselves. Nor are we.

B. Isaiah calls our Champion the “Prince of Peace.”

1. He took the field of battle with our sin and waged a bloody fight.
2. He won the fight and established peace between God and man.
3. He assures us that we can burn our battle clothes because there is no longer any need for warfare.

III. Our Champion rules to insure the peace he won for us.

A. Isaiah says our Champion will establish a spiritual government.

1. His governing work will be the justice and righteousness of the gospel.
2. His leadership will be characterized by his wonderful counseling of his people.

B. His government will be increased and enlarged when his subjects share the message of his victory to bring peace.

Conclusion:

The ornamental lights of Christmas cannot bring light to the moral darkness in the soul of man, but they can remind us of the “great light” that dawned when Christ was born into the world. He was able to dispel the darkness of sin and the shadow of death because only the God-man could be our Champion on the field of battle against an angry God. Let us rejoice under the rule of our Wonderful Counselor and shine as God’s own Christmas lights to bring the message of Christ’s peace to a gloomy world.

III

Isaiah Pictures the Coming Messiah as a Light for the Gentiles

Wilbert R. Gawrisch

Isaiah 49:5–7

The Bible teems with picture language. Figures of speech such as metaphors and similes are especially common in the poetic sections of Scripture. Books like Job, the Song of Songs and the Prophets in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New are rich in interesting, colorful pictures that stimulate our imagination and impress the truths of God on our hearts. To understand these truths it is important that we study the picture in each instance to determine the reality behind the picture.

In this Advent series we are focusing our attention on three pictures used by Isaiah to describe the coming Messiah. He calls him a lowly shoot from the stump of Jesse (11:1–4) and a champion who brings deliverance to God’s people (9:2–7). In this third pericope Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as a light for the Gentiles.

At times the Bible uses the word *light* in a literal sense, as when God on the first day of creation said, “Let there be light,” and there was light (Gn 1:3). Very often, however, *light* is used figuratively. Its meaning can sometimes be determined from words that are used in synonymous parallelism with it. So David, for example, writes, “The LORD is my light and my salvation” (Ps 27:1). Here *light* is a figure of speech meaning salvation. The figure in this case is a metaphor. The LORD is like light. For a person who has been trapped in a dark place, light means deliverance, rescue, safety. The Psalmist means that the LORD is his Savior.

The meaning of a figure can be further elucidated by considering its opposite. Hell is described as a place of “darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 8:12; 22:13). In other words, darkness represents indescribable woe, complete hopelessness, utter despair. Light, on the other hand, stands for hope and joy. Heaven is a place where “there will be no more night” (Re 22:5). God’s saints “will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light” (Re 22:5). He will be the continual source of their life and joy. In Psalm 97:11 *light* and *joy* are parallel terms: “Light is shed upon the righteous and joy on the upright in heart.”

In describing the Messiah in our text as “a light for the Gentiles,” therefore, Isaiah portrays him as offering the Gentiles salvation, life, hope and joy. This is borne out by the explanatory clause which is added, “that you may bring [literally, לְהַיּוֹת, be] *my salvation to the ends of the earth*” (v 6).

Analyzing the figures of speech in the text is one task of the interpreter. A second is to determine, if possible, the historical background of the text. That is especially important in preaching on the Prophets. In this series the background was sketched in some detail in the first sermon and to a lesser extent in the second. In preparing this third sermon, the preacher will need to bear in mind that some of his hearers may not have heard the two preceding sermons. Others may have forgotten the details. From experience we know that even knowledgeable Christians seem to have difficulty remembering the main facts in the history of God’s Old Testament people.

The preacher will need to repeat again and again the role that Assyria, Babylon and the kingdom of the Medes and Persians played in God’s dealing with Israel. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians captured Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and deported all the people of importance or means. At the time when Isaiah wrote the words of our text, the southern kingdom of Judah had not yet been carried off to Bablyon. But its

demise was certain. Equally certain was the subsequent fall of Babylon at the hands of Cyrus and his Medo-Persian forces (Is 44:28; 45:1, 13). This occurred in 539 B.C. Cyrus would permit the Jews to return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem with its temple (Is 44:28).

Notes on the text

Verse 5

And now the LORD says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength.

As the context shows, the tetragrammaton, YHWH, here refers to the Father. Even before Christ was born, the Father called him to be his Servant (49:1). He appointed him to his Messianic office. He formed him in the womb of his virgin mother (7:14). Jesus' human nature came into existence when he was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary.

The Son of God became man to carry out his Father's will (Jn 6:38). It was his assignment "to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself." Though God's people as a whole were unfaithful and hardened themselves in unbelief, God did not break his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Earlier Isaiah had written, "A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God" (10:21). To the Romans the Apostle Paul pointed out, "God did not reject his people whom he foreknew" (11:2). As in the days of Elijah God preserved a remnant of seven thousand who did not bow the knee to Baal, "so too at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace," Paul asserts (Ro 11:5).

During his earthly ministry Jesus confined his efforts to rescuing the lost sheep of Israel (Mt 15:24). This was because of God's promise to them (Ro 15:8). Jesus' apostles, too, began their work among the Jews. At Antioch in Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas told the angry and jealous Jews, "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles" (Ac 13:46).

The LORD prepared his Servant, not only to convert Israel, but also to honor the Servant himself. The Messiah looks ahead to the accomplishment of his mission and declares, "I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength." God equipped Jesus for his work and enabled him to complete his difficult task. Earlier God had promised, "I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles" (42:6). Trusting confidently in this promise, the Messiah could say, "Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced" (50:7). Speaking through the mouth of David, he declares, "I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken" (Ps 16:8).

Verse 6

He says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

A small remnant of the exiles in Babylon would return to the Promised Land. Converting and restoring God's elect, those he had "kept" among these, was the Messiah's great and important assignment. Its accomplishment would redound to his praise. But the Father has an even greater task for him to carry out. He is to bring light and life to the Gentiles. He is to be God's Savior for people throughout the world.

Even when God chose Israel to be his special people, he did not abandon the rest of mankind. God told Abraham, "*All people on earth* will be blessed through you" (Gn 12:3). The Savior who was to come from Abraham's family would carry out God's desire and plan that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tm 2:4). Holding the Christ Child in his arms, aged Simeon called him "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" and for glory to God's people Israel (Lk 2:32). He is the light of the *world*, or the entire human race (Jn 8:12).

Isaiah's words have been called the Great Commission of the Old Testament. That they surely are. For the Messiah carries out his assignment of bringing joy and hope to the nations sitting in darkness and the shadow of death through his followers. Not only does he say, "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12), but, speaking to his disciples, he says, "*You* are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14). We are reflectors of his light. We carry his light to the ends of the earth by preaching his gospel. It is obvious that this text has a strong mission emphasis. The sermon should not fail to sound that note.

Verse 7

This is what the LORD says—the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

The Messiah's mission is the plan and project of the LORD, YHWH, the Savior-God, who is "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Ex 34:6, 7). He identifies himself also as "the Redeemer" (רִדְיָהוּ) of Israel. By a solemn covenant he obligated himself to ransom and rescue his people. He is also Israel's "Holy One." His promises are sure. He "does not lie or change his mind" (1 Sm 15:29). In his absolute holiness he devised a plan to make his people holy. That plan involved the suffering and death of his Servant-son. The high cost of ransoming his people is alluded to in the words, "to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers." The cross of Calvary casts its shadow over the manger of Bethlehem.

The great tragedy of Israel was that the LORD's Servant came to save them, but they rejected him. He came to his own, but his own did not receive him (Jn 1:11). The picture painted by Isaiah in chapter 53 is familiar: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (v 3). He was abhorred "like one from whom men hide their faces" (ibid.). Tyrants treated him like a slave. The servants of the high priest, of Herod and Pontius Pilate made sport of him. The Messiah's own words in Psalm 22 paint a graphic picture: "I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads" (vv 6, 7).

At the same time, however, the LORD foretells the Messiah's ultimate victory: "Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down." From the depths of shame and disgrace the LORD will exalt, honor and glorify him most highly according to his faithful promise. The cross will lead to the crown. His triumph will bring glory to the Holy One of Israel, who chose him for this rescue mission for the world. Paul reports the fulfillment: "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Php 2:9–11).

Outline

Introduction:

The Advent wreath in the chancel is a kind of visual aid, a sermon in symbolism, a silent preacher. The circle of evergreen boughs represents everlasting life. This life is ours through the Christ Child. The purple candles remind us that repentance is the proper way to prepare for his coming. Repentance means first of all recognizing our sins. But the main part of repentance is that we believe that God in his grace and love has forgiven our sins for Jesus' sake. The big white Christ candle is lighted on Christmas to remind us that Jesus, the light of the world, has come.

Seven hundred years before Christ's birth Isaiah announces:

The Coming Messiah will be a Light for the Gentiles

I. This was his divine call.

- A. No one serves God's people without a call from God (Ro 10:15).
 - 1. Moses, Aaron, Jesus' apostles, our pastors and teachers today—all received a divine call.
 - 2. The Messiah, too, was called by God to be his Servant (v 5a).
- B. His double assignment.
 - 1. To bring a remnant of Israel back to the LORD (v 5b, 6a).
 - a) A remnant would return from the Babylonian captivity (Is 45:13).
 - b) A remnant of these would be "kept" and return to the LORD (Is 10:21).
 - 2. To be a light for the Gentiles (v 6b).
 - a) This had been promised to Abraham (Gn 12:3).
 - b) This was announced by Simeon (Lk 2:32).

Application: Thanks be to God that he did not leave us Gentiles out of his Christmas plans!

Transition: Not all who receive a call from God carry out their assignment. But Jesus did!

II. This was his great achievement.

- A. The world, shrouded in darkness, rejected him (v 7a).
 - 1. He suffered shame and death.
 - 2. That was the purpose of his Advent.
- B. In the strength of the LORD he became the Savior of all (v 5d, 6c, d).
 - 1. God raised him to glory.
 - 2. His light goes out to the ends of the earth.

Application: Vacancies in our synod's world mission fields are not being filled. Mission stations in our country are being closed. Workers are standing idle in the marketplace. With Christ's saving light shining in our hearts, how can we be anything but bright reflectors of his light to the ends of the earth?