

Look Who Has Come to the World: The Gospel According to Isaiah

Isaiah 9:1-7

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I have chosen for this Christmas morning a text from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 9, verses 2 to 7. It is a familiar text; printed, at least in part, on many Christmas cards. It might interest you to know that up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, it was illegal to read the text out loud in the churches of Eastern Europe. Thanks to George Fredric Handel, who in 1741 set the text to music in his “Messiah”, nearly everyone in the Westernized world has heard the pivotal verse: “for unto us a child is born, unto us a child is given.” Even as I spoke the words, many of us begin to sing them in our heads. “For unto us a child is born”. But do we hear what we are singing? Do we really hear? “For unto us a child is born.” “For unto us...” “For...”. The key word in the pivotal verse is the conjunction “for”. “For unto us a child...” What is the ‘for’ there for? A better way to render the Hebrew term Isaiah uses is “because”. “Because unto us a child is born.” “Because unto us a Son is given.” What is the “because” there for? What is the “because” doing there? Well, let us read the text to find out why. Whenever we read a text from the Biblical Prophets, we read to remember that the words are first spoken to a particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time, for a particular purpose. Yes! It turns out that Isaiah was prophesying an event which would happen seven centuries after He spoke the event we celebrate today. An event that impacts the whole of the world and all of time. But when he first spoke the words, he was speaking to a particular group of people, in a particular geographical location, at a particular time in history, for a particular purpose. Isaiah spoke the text made famous by Handel’s “Messiah” to a people who were afraid. To a people who were not only anxious but very afraid. He spoke to people whose world was falling apart! It was the 8th century BC. Assyria was the dominant political and military power in the Middle East. And Assyria was slowly gobbling up all the smaller, less-powerful nations around her. In 734 BC the King of Assyria moved his troops into Palestine. Two years later he conquered all of Syria, and invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel – what we know as Galilee. By 722 BC, Israel was completely destroyed and the ten tribes scattered into racial oblivion. Even as Isaiah spoke his “because a Child is born unto us” the Assyrian army was perched at the border of Judah. The people could hear the boots of trampling soldiers; they could see the garments rolled in blood. Darkness was descending. Gloom thickly rising. Ever felt that way? Ever felt like it would all engulf you? Ever felt like it was all going to collapse?

1) The King of Judah was afraid. 2) The people of Judah were afraid. 3) Who were they in comparison to the forces of darkness and destruction at the border? Then came the word of the Lord. “Do not be afraid”. “Do not be afraid”. Why? Because Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, the Commander of the armies of heaven, would do four things... described in Isaiah 9:2-5. Verse 2 – God. Yahweh would cause light to shine in the darkness. He would cause joy to spring up in the gloom. He would break the yoke of oppression. And he would burn up the instruments of war. And why would all this happen? Because the king of Judah would pull off some clever political maneuvers? Because some other super-power would come on the scene and smash Assyria? No. It would all happen because a child will be born. “For...For unto us a child is born”. Because...because a Son will be given to us”.

Put yourself in the shoes of King Ahaz and the people of Judah. A super-power stands at your border... ready to invade. You and your fellow citizens are terribly afraid. God speaks a word of hope: "Do not be afraid". And what does God call you to do? To look at your own army for security? To look on another army to come and rescue you? To look to your own ingenuity and prowess? No. God calls you to look at a child! The ground of your Hope, is the birth of a child! Now, any time a child is born our spirit is lifted. The miracle of birth does something for us. A doctor once said to me "every birth is a sign that God has not given up on the world". Isaiah is, however, obviously speaking of a unique birth. "A child will be born, a son will be given". Note the verb. Born...given. Born... given. Born suggests that child's real humanity. 'Given ' suggests something unique. Given by whom? 'Given ' suggests a special act of the Creator. And here is the major point of Isaiah 9 ... and why I chose this text Christmas morning. When this Child is born. When this Son is given, the four great promises can be fulfilled. Because this child is born. 1) light will shine in the darkness; 2) joy will spring up in the gloom; 3) the yoke of oppression will be shattered; and 4) the instruments of war will burn up!

The question is then who? Who is this child? Who is this Son? About the time Isaiah prophesied, the wife of King Ahaz of Judah gave birth to a Son named Hezekiah. Was Hezekiah the child on whose shoulders rested the fulfillment of the promises? He turned out to be a Godly man, a very good king. But he hardly ushered in the light and joy, the freedom and peace Isaiah foresaw. After Hezekiah came other kings all less Godly than he. Then came Josiah a really good king. Was he the child? He did effect tremendous ethical and economic reform. Yet he hardly ushered in the kind of light and joy and freedom and peace envisioned in Isaiah 9. Who then is this child? Unless he is born the promises cannot be realized. None of the kings after Josiah even came close? How could they? Look at the names the child is to be called! How could mere mortals ever live up to them? Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. How could any mere human possibly embody all that those names imply? "Wonderful" A word Isaiah uses in other places ... but only of God! It means 'incomprehensible', 'full of glory'. It means 'supernatural'. The child to be given is like God, a wonder, an incomprehensible/ supernatural wonder. Who is He?

"Counselor". Someone to whom to turn for wisdom. Someone who embodies upright, discernment, truth. Someone who leads us into the very counsels of the Living God. Someone who knows God thoroughly and intimately – Who is this Child? "Mighty-one" Oh my. Again, a term Isaiah uses in other places but again, only of the Living God.

"Mighty-God". In Hebrew *Eloi Gibur*. El: God. Gibbor: hero/ champion/ warrior/ strong one. Like God, the child possesses great strength. The strength to deliver. Who is He? Are we talking about God Himself coming to birth in the world?

"Everlasting Father". Literally "Father of eternity" or "Father of all futures". The Source of all life, possessor of eternity. "A child will be born". Feel the paradox. The One who Begets is Begotten. The One Who causes children to be born is born a Child. Who is He?

“Prince of Peace” and Ruler of Shalom. One who ushers in and administrates the Shalom of God. Shalom is much more than absence of war. Shalom is primarily the Presence of Wholeness, the Presence of Glory, the fullness of the Kingdom of God. The Child gives Peace because He is peace. Who is He?

Years passed. Decades passed. Centuries passed. “A child will be born to us”. Then it happened. In Bethlehem in Judea. During the time when Caesar Augustus thought he ruled the world. When he thought government rested on his shoulders. In a village under occupation by foreign troops. The night sky filled with the angelic army singing “Glory to God in the Highest.” Why? Because the child with all the names was born. Wonderful was born! Counselor was born! Mighty God was born! Eternal Father was born! Prince of Peace was born! Finally! The Son was given. And what a scene it was! Wonderful ... lying on a cattle trough. Counselor ... at the mercy of sinners. Mighty God ... a helpless infant, unable to feed Himself. Father of Eternity ... in time; held in the arms of a young girl. Prince of Peace ... born into a violent war-torn part of the world.

And do you see what it all means? In light of Isaiah 9... do you see what it means for the coming years? The promises can be realized! Everything that comes before the ‘for’ before the ‘because’ can now be realized. Isaiah 9:2 “ The people who walk in darkness will see a great light”. Because the Child was born, darkness does not have the last word. Jesus the light shines in the darkness. And as the apostle John declares, “the darkness cannot master it” (1:15). A number of years ago, the narrator at our children’s high school Christmas concert put it so peacefully: “never again will there be total darkness.” Jesus, the Light breaks the spell of darkness. He exposes the lies and overcomes the illusions. He shines into the suffocating dark of depression. I know He has done it for me.

“Because” Isaiah is not saying the darkness eventually gives way to the light. He is not holding before us some automatic, evolutionary urge within the cosmos. Left to itself, darkness gets darker. It is ‘because’ the Child is born that the light shines in the darkness. It is because Jesus is Who He is that the darkness can never extinguish the light.

Isaiah 9:3 “You will multiply the nation, you will increase their gladness”. Because the child is born, sorrow does not have the last word. Jesus the Joy of God lifts the heaviness of disappointment and despair. His Presence pushes away the weight of grey gloom.

I know that for many people this time of year is a hard time...filled with sadness. And I understand why. It happens to me, too. I encourage you to do what the text calls us to do: look not at the disappointments...look not at the broken expectations...look not at all the needs...look not at the losses. Rather, look at...look at...the Child. Look at Jesus. When we see Him in the picture then His joy breaks through the gloom.

“Because” again, Isaiah is not saying the sorrow eventually gives way to joy. He is not holding before us some automatic evolutionary urge within the cosmos. Left to itself sorrow gets worse. It is “because the child is born” that joy breaks into the gloom. It is because Jesus is Who He is that mourning can turn into dancing again.

Isaiah 9:4 “You will break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders” Because the Child is born, oppression – be it political, economic, emotional, or spiritual – does not have the last word. Jesus the Mighty God, the Divine Warrior, shatters the yokes! Oh how we need to hear this in our time. Is not our time a time of terrible bondage? Is not North America held captive... not to a super-power like Assyria but to a super-er-power named “Addiction”? Oh brother and sisters! Because the child is born, bondage does not have the last word. Because the Son is given, there is hope for freedom from any form of addiction. Jesus the Stronger-than-any-super-er-power can break the yoke of alcohol or cocaine or pornography or material. Jesus the Champion can free us from terrifying memories, crippling guilt, bitterness, self-pity, poor self-esteem. He comes to set the captives free! Sin and Satan loose their grip when Jesus enters the picture.

“Because” again, Isaiah is not saying that bondage eventually gives way to freedom. He is not holding before us some automatic evolutionary urge within the cosmos. Left to itself addiction finally kills. It is “because the Child is born” that the yoke of oppression is shattered. It is because Jesus is Who He is that the chains fall off.

Isaiah 9:15 “Every boot of the booted warrior. ..will be for burning, fuel for the fire”. Because the child is born, hostility and strife, hatred and violence do not have the last word. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, makes instruments of destruction unnecessary. When Jesus walks into the ‘war room’ peace really does have a chance. When Jesus walks into a gang-terrorized mall or neighbourhood, peace has a chance. When Jesus is welcomed in the city, the streets become safer for children. “Because” again, Isaiah is not saying that hostility eventually dissolves into peace. He is not holding before us some automatic evolutionary urge within the cosmos. Look at the Middle-East. Look at Africa. Look at our Inner City. Left to itself, hostility eventually erupts into violence of some sort. It is ‘because the Child is born’ that peace can happen. It is because Jesus is Who He is that tanks are pounded into tractors. Darkness is strong...I know, but Jesus – the Light – is stronger. Sorrow is strong...I know, but Jesus – the Joy – is stronger. Bondage is strong...I know, but Jesus – our Freedom – is stronger. Hostility and discord are strong...I know, but Jesus – our Peace – is stronger still.

But, someone asks, if the Child is born, why does darkness still hang over the earth? If the Son has been given, why has the grip of addiction seemed to be intensified? Why have the last years of the 21st century been under a cloud of war? Why? Although the answer sounds simplistic, I mean it in all seriousness. The light and joy, the freedom and peace of Jesus the Son are experienced, where and when He is allowed in and given room to work. When the government is on His shoulders.

The darkness and gloom, the bondage and strife of our time do not declare that the Child has not been given access to human hearts. “Joy to the world the Lord has come. ...” and the next line. “Let earth receive her king, let every heart prepare Him room?” Has earth received her King? Has every heart prepared Him room? Has every heart in this room prepared Him room? It is when the Child is allowed in, that darkness is pierced by His light, that sorrow is lifted by His joy, that bondage is broken by His victory, that the instruments of war are defused by His Peace. A wish, a dream? Pious, naïve optimism? No! For the vision is as flesh and blood as the child. The possibilities as certain as the Son Himself!

One of the persons I count as a spiritual director is E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary to India. I have never met him, but I have read just about everything he has written. He always puts things in a Gospel –perspective.

Jones observed that as the early Christians looked out at their world... frightening world...a collapsing world... they did not say what many of us say. They did not say in dismay “Look what the world has come to.” But, says Jones, they said in delight “Look what has come to the world!” The child with all the Names has come to the world!

Jones continued. “They saw not merely the ruin, but the resources for the reconstruction of the ruin. They saw not merely that sin did abound, but that grace did much more abound. NOT – “look what the world has come to!” BUT – “Look what has come to the world.”

Let us pray. I invite you to name any darkness, any sorrow, any bondage, any strife, in you or around you. What is lurking at the border of your life, threatening to undo you? I invite you to then open up those places... and welcome Jesus in. Invite Him in as light.. Invite Him in as Joy. Invite Him in as Freedom. Invite Him in as Peace.

Something will happen. Maybe not this instant, maybe not today. But soon. For as Isaiah says “the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish this” (9:7)

The zeal of the Lord, the passion of the Lord. Christmas is about God’s zeal to overcome, all darkness, all gloom, all bondage, all strife.

For unto us a Child is given. Because unto us a Son is given.