

Faith Mennonite Church  
November 19, 2017  
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## Hope in Unexpected Places *Isaiah 9:1-7*

Some of you might be scratching your heads this morning: it's not Advent yet, is it? No, you're right, Advent doesn't begin until December 3. But since the Narrative Lectionary moves us through our Judeo-Christian story in chronological order, it's time for Isaiah, Advent or not! Of course, all parts of scripture are relevant to all times and seasons in our lives. While we might associate certain texts with particular seasons, we should not imprison them there.

The opening verses of Isaiah 9 fit well with this particular time of year in the northern hemisphere, especially as we're still adjusting to the fall back to standard time and darkness seems to envelope us way too early each afternoon. For those of us whose mental and emotional wellbeing is negatively influenced by cloudy days, November is a month when we identify with the moods of gloom and anguish into which Isaiah speaks.

As Bret and I met to discuss the songs we would sing today, he shared briefly how he tries not to use images of light and darkness in his song-writing because of the implicit message these words carry in our racialized society. Light is often associated with goodness and positivity; dark with evil and negativity. Others in our congregation have also talked about this, and I very much appreciated Barbara Brown Taylor's book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, in which she helps readers consider the goodness of darkness and what we can learn from darkness.

But this week as I read these words, I tried to imagine 8<sup>th</sup> century Israel before the Christian era. Isaiah followed on the footsteps of Amos, whose words we considered last Sunday. While Amos preached in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, from a base in the northern kingdom, Isaiah preached during the final third of the century in the southern kingdom, following the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria. His audience in Jerusalem had no doubt visited areas in the north that were abandoned and without light. At a time when all artificial light came from fire and oil lamps, natural darkness could be profound. Imagine being in the Boundary Waters without a flashlight when there is no moon. From this view, darkness is not so much a matter of good and evil but one of clarity: what is visible. And following the pillage of an invading, imperial army, darkness was a feeling of helplessness, hopelessness, gloom. The images we have seen from the war in Syria and southern Sudan no doubt approximate the conditions that Isaiah was witnessing and speaking of.

It's as if Isaiah pulls out a flashlight! No, a floodlight! He sees a great light and not only light but joy! And this isn't ordinary small-time joy. This is abundant joy: the joy of a bumper crop ... the joy of a winning team taking home the prize trophy. With the damage of war clearly in view, Isaiah has the audacity to imagine a wholly different picture. Isaiah describes a scene in which the conquered, oppressed people are rising up and building a huge bonfire to ignite the uniforms, the boots, the instruments of war of those who conquered them.

Isaiah compares this glorious bonfire consuming the leftovers of war with "the day of Midian." Midian referred to a battle waged by a man named Gideon in a former time. Gideon's victory at Midian was recalled by the people of Israel because Gideon's army was small, well out-numbered and out-armored by the enemy. In fact, God had Gideon send a good portion of the soldiers home before the battle began. Yet God gave victory. Isaiah is reminding his people that a victorious enemy, who relies on human power, is only temporary. God will prevail, not by outfitting a stronger army but by being present with God's people. And that presence sometimes takes unexpected forms.

A child will be born. Not a new conscription plan. A child will be born. Not a new missile system. A child will be born. Not a massive aircraft carrier. A child will be born. Not a drone, controlled from a continent away. A child will be born. A child who will grow up to become one who receives authority to lead according to his names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince

of Peace. The child with these names will lead toward endless peace. The child with these names will establish and uphold justice.

Isaiah's prophesy was not fulfilled immediately. In fact, biblical scholars believe that 200 years separate the early chapters of the book of Isaiah and the latter portion that was edited by another witness or a community of witnesses. Isaiah's prophesy would follow the southern kingdom into exile and it would still be alive in Palestine under a later, Roman occupation centuries later. Isaiah's prophesy inspired early Christians as they reflected on Jesus' life and death and resurrection. In fact, New Testament writers quoted Isaiah more than any other portion of scripture. Isaiah's vision of a child who would lead, and in another section of the book, of a Suffering Servant, continue to remind us that those who place their hope in God form a community that will not allow the power of might or the threat of destruction to ever have the final word.

We live in a moment in history that feels very fragile. A record number of people in the world—some 60 million or more—have been displaced by conflict and war and do not have a permanent home. Scientists tell us that the earth's temperature continues to increase in a dangerous way, causing a rise in sea levels and a new intensity in storms. Within our country, concern for the common good seems to be eroding: some days it seems as if we will extinguish ourselves through addiction to drugs and to guns.

But this is precisely the moment when hope takes form. We don't need hope when things are going well. Sure, we use the word frequently: I hope it doesn't rain when we're planning to go camping...I hope we stay healthy this winter...I hope we get enough snow so we can do some real cross-country skiing this year. But these, friends, are wishes, not hope.

Hope is for when nothing is guaranteed. Hope is for when nothing seems possible. Hope is for when the hurricane has passed and left nothing but devastation in its wake. Hope is for when a city has been bombed time and again until the last insurgent has departed and former neighborhoods are nothing but rubble heaps. Hope is for when immigration detainees sit in detention centers awaiting a judge's ruling on whether they can stay with their family or be deported. This is when Isaiah's words capturing God's vision cry out to us: there *is* light penetrating the gloom ... there *is* joy in the midst of disaster ... In the Gospel of John, Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (8:12). As followers of Jesus, we proclaim his presence and his power over death. We proclaim his peace as we commit ourselves each day to the ways of justice and righteousness.

As a congregation we made a commitment this year to grow as *children* of God. Part of this commitment is honoring the children and youth among us and learning with and from them. Part of this commitment is renewing and enlivening the child within each of us. One of the first gifts of childhood is simply *to be*, to be protected, to be cared for, to be nourished, to be loved. As we watch this occur in the families in our midst and as we join in that protective care, we nourish hope. As we watch personalities and skills develop, and witness a new generation filled with care and compassion and a desire to follow Jesus, we know Isaiah's vision to be true.

As children we do not have to have all the answers. We do not have to solve all the problems. We alone cannot make or do justice. But we can be part of the community across the centuries who walks in step with the leader who came as a child, the one called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Mother, Prince of Peace. We have been invited into a kingdom and a community of peace and as long as we accept this invitation and extend it to others, peace will prevail. The kingdom of God *is* among us. Thanks be to God!