

Isaiah for Advent

Ralph W. Klein

Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of Old Testament, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and editor of Currents in Theology and Mission.

All four of the Old Testament readings for Advent in Series C of the Revised Common Lectionary come from Isaiah, or, more precisely, from that portion of Isaiah 1-66 that has become known in critical scholarship as First Isaiah or Isaiah of Jerusalem (chaps 1-39). At least three of these texts are well known--2:1-5 swords into plowshares; 7:10-16 the Immanuel prophecy; and 11:1-10 the spirit-endowed leader and the wolf lying down with the lamb. The fourth passage, 35:1-10, with its promise of a recreated wilderness, the healing of physically challenged people, and the return of the ransomed of Yahweh to Zion, is hardly obscure and has reminded many observers of passages from Second Isaiah (chaps 40-55). Despite our general familiarity with these pericopes, however, these passages are not easy to interpret and their implications for life and ministry today have often been missed. And so I ask: what would it mean for worship and preaching if the Advent season in your congregation were built around these four Isaianic texts?¹

Isaiah 2:1-5

Modern scholarship remains convinced that the book of Isaiah emerged over a period of two or three centuries, and that many texts including this one, are most difficult to date

¹ This study is written to honor Everett R. Kalin, a very close friend, who team-taught a course in biblical interpretation for fifteen years with me at Concordia Seminary and later at Christ Seminary-Seminex. Those were the years when biblical interpretation was in the cross hairs of those determined to rid the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod of historical criticism, and the "Ev and Ralphie Show," as the students dubbed it, was our way of supporting one another and demonstrating that historical criticism could indeed be used productively *christo et ecclesiae*, for Christ and for the church. The rich treatment of peace, the work of the Spirit, and justice in these passages echo the passions of our honoree.

within that trajectory. In the last couple of decades, scholarship has deconstructed the neat lines between the three Isaiahs and recognized that not only are relatively late passages found in First Isaiah (traditionally 1-39), but that the present arrangement of the book shows an effort to create a unified reading, linking together its separate parts and anticipating the last chapters of Third Isaiah already in the first chapters of Isaiah of Jerusalem. There are many lexical ties between chapters 1 and 65-66. In addition, the first part of the book of Isaiah projects judgment on and subsequent restoration of Judah and Jerusalem, and the second part of the book announces that judgment has ended and restoration is beginning.

Chapter 1 deals with the punishment, purification, and redemption of Jerusalem, and then 2:2-5 announces Zion's role as the center for Yahweh's world rule. The temple mount, a hundred feet shorter than the Mount of Olives,² will become "in days to come" the highest mountain in the world.³ Almost like a magnet, the temple mount will attract the nations of the world, who will make pilgrimages to Jerusalem to learn Yahweh's Torah or instruction, and they will express a desire to walk in Yahweh's ethical ways. Yahweh is depicted in this passage as the dispenser of binding arbitration--he will resolve all international disputes. As a result, war will become obsolete and irrelevant, and people will retool their swords into plows and their spears into hedge shears. With no cause for war, wars will not be fought nor will people find the history of military adventures interesting. The folk song echoes back this poem: "I Ain't Gonna Study War No More."

² At its highest point, the Mount of Olives is 2,963 feet above the Mediterranean Sea Level.

³ Mt. Hermon, the tallest mountain known to the biblical writers, is 9,230 feet high. Mt. Everest is 29,035 feet high.

This passage also occurs in Isaiah's contemporary prophet Micah where an additional verse spells out the resulting domestic tranquility: each nation will sit under its own vine and own fig tree, and no one will intimidate them (Mic 4:4).

How are we to interpret this passage? Were Isaiah and Micah false prophets since their words did not come true?⁴ Are these passages to be taken metaphorically as pictures of heaven? Are they like other depictions of utopia, too impractical to implement and designed only to get the reader to dream about a new reality.

I would suggest two other possibilities. First, both Isaiah and Micah contain what I would call liturgical responses to these promises:

"O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of Yahweh!" Isa 2:5

"For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of Yahweh our God forever and ever." Mic 4:5.

These liturgical responses to the divine promises concede that we live in a world of wars and rumors of wars, but they also promise that Israel itself will start living as if these promises were true. The people of God today might be encouraged and empowered by the gospel to practice peace-making at home, in the congregation, and in society. While others may still choose to fight, the people of God would resolve to walk in the light of the promises contained in these texts regardless of what others might choose to do.

A second possibility builds on the implications of Christianity's heightened eschatology. Just as the early Christians saw the resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of the new age and saw initial fulfillments of the promise of the Spirit at Pentecost and of the ingathering of the nations in their witness to the Gentiles, so we might take these words as renewed promises or challenges addressed to the people of God today. What

would it mean for Christian behavior if we took these promises seriously as our Advent future? What if we stood on tiptoe in anticipation of their imminent fulfillment? Would not the church become a powerful force for peace?

Isaiah 11:1-10

This messianic prophecy promises that a shoot will come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch will blossom from its roots.⁵ The stump results from Yahweh's act of judgment as woodsman in Isa 10:33-34 although it is unclear whether Israel and its kings have therefore been axed by the Assyrian or Babylonian invasions of the 8th to 6th centuries, or whether the stump results from Yahweh's own issuing of a threat against all that was proud in the land. In any case, Nathan's promise to David is still alive in Isaiah's opinion (2 Samuel 7//1 Chronicles 17), and a new king, or even a new David, is expected to appear soon.

This king will have a seven-fold gift of the spirit--the spirit of Yahweh, of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh. These gifts of the spirit will lead the king to just judicial decisions (wisdom and understanding, like Solomon), to effective military leadership (counsel and might are synonyms for military strategy), or to exemplary piety (acknowledgment of and reverence for Yahweh). Only Saul and David of Israel's kings had charismatic endowment (1 Sam 10:10-11; 16:13; 2 Sam 23:2). Solomon and his descendants profited

⁴ See Deut 18:21-22.

⁵ Those of us who survived the purge in Missouri to teach at Christ Seminary-Seminex chose this image as our seminary logo. Chopped down in the church of our birth, we experienced luxuriant new life in exile.

by dynastic inertia--Solomon and all his successors became king because their father was king before them.⁶

This future and ideal king will be a righteous administrator of justice, as was expected of all Israelite kings (Ps 72:12-14) and of all royalty in the Ancient Near East in general. He will not be influenced by bribes or by those of wealth or high station (v 3); he will have a preferential option for the poor (v 4a); and he will announce harsh verdicts on the arrogant wicked (v 4b).⁷

Another paragraph (11:6-9) announces the paradisaical conditions that will prevail during/because of the reign of this new king. Wild and domestic animals will become strange bedfellows and dinner companions--wolves with lambs, panthers with young goats, and cows and lions, with a young child tending this mongrel herd. Cow and bear will eat from the same pasture, and the carnivorous lion will become vegetarian.⁸ Human infants will play with horned vipers; yes, nursing babies will put their hand into the lairs of vipers with no harm resulting. The earth will be transformed into the Garden of Eden, that is, conditions of the end time will return to the conditions enjoyed by our first parents.⁹ The last verse in this paragraph attributes this transformation from a violent to a non-violent world to the universal acknowledgment of Yahweh's sovereignty, a picture not unlike Isaiah 2 and Micah 4.

The lectionary, somewhat inappropriately, includes v 10 in this pericope, even though scholarship is strongly inclined to say that Isa 11:10-16 comes from a much later

⁶ The only exception is Athaliah, the queen mother of Ahaziah, who seized power for six years after attempting to wipe out the rest of the royal household (2 Kgs 11:1-3).

⁷ The word "earth" in v 4 is commonly emended to the similar-looking word (in Hebrew) "arrogant," which makes a better parallel with "wicked." The "rod of his mouth" and "the breath of his lips" are metaphorical descriptions of the king's role as judge. This image of the mouth as weapon was taken literally in Rev 19:15 where Jesus is depicted with a sharp sword projecting from his mouth.

⁸ These thoughts are repeated in Isa 65:25.

time.¹⁰ In v 10 the "root of Jesse" has become a title for the expected king, who will attract the nations to himself like a beacon and they will voluntarily submit themselves to him. The reference to his resting place being glorious may be an allusion back, with some linguistic license, to his spirit endowment in v 2.

A number of Advent themes suggest themselves as we reflect on the significance of Jesus and the community centered on his name. The messianic age is a time when God can bring life from death and victory from defeat. Followers of Christ, like their master, can be blessed by or endowed with the spirit.¹¹ The messiah and the messianic community have a social conscience, with a passion for justice. Everything is changed by the advent of this messiah--the environment, even the "orders of creation." The messiah and the messianic community by their behavior attract and win over the curious outsiders. Talk about a challenge to our lifestyle and our efforts at evangelism!

Isaiah 35:1-10

While many commentators have seen a similarity between this pericope and parts of Second Isaiah, this chapter functions in the book of Isaiah as part of a diptych with Isaiah 34. Chapter 34 announces divine judgment on the nations, and chapter 35 promises the return of the redeemed to Zion. These pericopes "point both backward to the earlier Isaianic prophecies as well as forward to the ensuing chapters."¹² The contrast between Edom, the enemy par excellence, and Judah is worked out in detail. Both chapters announce God's coming in judgment (34:1-4; 35:4); the thorns, nettles, and thistles in

⁹ Urzeit wird Endzeit--the conditions of primeval time reoccur in eschatological time.

¹⁰ These verses may in fact come from more than one hand. Verses 11-12 announce the return of Israel from its scattered diaspora; verse 13 talks about the reconciliation between Judah and the Northern kingdom; verse 14 describes their joint military adventures against their age-old enemies; verses 15-16 promise an Exodus from Assyria like the earlier one from Egypt.

¹¹ See Everett R. Kalin, "The Inspired Community: A Glance at Canon History," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (1971) 541-549.

Edom contrast with the reeds and rushes in Israel (34:13; 35:7); Edom lacks fresh water and Judah abounds in it (34:9; 35:6-7); Judah will no longer be like Edom, the haunt of jackals and other dangerous animals (34:9, 13; 35:6-7); travel will be impossible in Edom but pilgrims travel on a paved road in Judah (34:10; 35:8).¹³

Chapter 35 speaks of God's Advent or coming (35:4; 40:9-10). God will come with vengeance against his enemies, but he will come to save "you," the people of God (v 4). God's coming means the renewal of creation--the wilderness will rejoice and the desert will blossom (v 1). God's good news is always for our bad situations. Hence those who are physically challenged will recover their sight, their hearing, their ability to walk and to speak.¹⁴ The road on which God's people travel is a Holy Way, just as God promises to dwell with those who are repentant and humble in spirit (Isa 57:15, 18). Verse 10 is a quotation from Isa 51:11: "And the ransomed of Yahweh shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."¹⁵ The people experience not just deliverance from Babylon but they share in God's new creation: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth" (Isa 65:17).

This passage keeps the renewal of creation and human salvation together as a common goal of God's promises. It encourages the faithful in anticipation of God's coming (vv 3-4; 43:1-4). It admonishes us not to accept the status quo, even on physical disabilities--God is the one who heals all our infirmities (Ps 103:3). The result of God's coming is changed lives--God's people walk on a Holy Way on which not even fools can

¹² Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 253.

¹³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*; Anchor Bible 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 456.

¹⁴ The HarperCollins Study Bible errs in describing these as spiritual disabilities. That might apply to being blind and deaf (Isa 42:18-19; 43:8), but not to being lame and mute.

go astray. Finally, this passage sees the goal of the divine-human encounter to be our sheer joy in God's presence. This is an Advent text for all those whose God is too small or whose view of the regenerate life is crimped and cramped. The gospel renews and empowers the church in its goal to transform society.

Isa 7:10-16

This Old Testament passage has a clear--but a rather complicated--relationship to the Gospel for the day, Matt 1:18-25. This gospel, for the 4th Sunday of Advent, reports the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary. All this took place, Matthew reports, to "fulfill" what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "'The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"

Matthew seems to be using a first century Jewish style of exegesis, also known in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that asks not what the text meant in its original context, but what might its eschatological meaning be. The eschatological meaning of Isaiah 7:14 is found in the virgin birth and in the positive meaning of the name Emmanuel, "God [is] with us."

The meaning of Isa 7:10-16 in its original context is another story. That pericope reports events during the Syro-Ephraimite War, 734-732 BCE, when the Northern Kingdom under Pekah and Aram/Syria under Rezin tried to force Ahaz of Judah into an anti-Assyrian coalition. Accompanied by his son Shear-jashub,¹⁶ Isaiah warned Ahaz not to be afraid of these two invading kings but rather to trust in God's promises: "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (Isa 7:9).

In a second episode, Ahaz received an oracle from Yahweh, directing him to ask for a sign as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. This may refer to a sign announced by

¹⁵ Cf. Isa 65:19 "No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in [Jerusalem], or the cry of distress."

an earthquake or in lightning. With seeming piety,¹⁷ Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign lest it put Yahweh to a test. Isaiah, however, treats his answer as a refusal to trust God and announces that God will give him a sign anyway. We might translate v 14b as follows: "That young woman over there is pregnant and will bear a son, and she will call him Immanuel."

As recognized already by the translators of the RSV in 1952, the word עלמה should be translated "young woman" and not "virgin."¹⁸ But who is this woman? Some say an anonymous woman, others say it is Ms. Ahaz, and still others think it is Ms. Isaiah. Isaiah already has two other children with names of significance, Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Immanuel might be a third. If the mother-to-be is Ms. Ahaz, the child might be Hezekiah. But if there is ambiguity about the identity of the mother-to-be, there is also uncertainty about the significance of the name Immanuel. Does it mean "God is with us" and everything will be ok, or does it mean "God is with us" and God will punish us?

The answer would seem to lie in vv 15-17, but an interpreter is faced with six difficult questions in trying to determine the meaning of this passage, which is shortened by one verse in the lectionary.

- A. Are curds and honey (v 15) the food of prosperity (A-1) or the food of affliction (A-2)?
- B. Is the infinitive in v 15 to be taken as temporal (by the time he...B-1) or as final (so that he...B-2)?

¹⁶ The meaning of this name is disputed. Does it mean "A remnant will survive this catastrophe," or "Only a remnant [of the army of Pekah and Rezin] will return home," or "Only a remnant will repent"?

¹⁷ Deut 6:16: "Do not put Yahweh to the test."

- C. Is the choice between good and evil a moral one (C-1) or does it only refer to the maturity needed to make decisions (C-2)?¹⁹
- D. Is Ephraim's departure from Judah a reference to the prosperous days before the breakup of the United Monarchy (D-1), or to the times of hardship immediately thereafter (D-2)?
- E. Is the "king of Assyria" in v 17 a gloss (E-1) or is it authentic (E-2)?
- F. Is the connotation of the name Immanuel positive (F-1) or negative (F-2)?

Consider this translation of vv 15-17 in the New English Bible (NEB): By the time that he has learnt to reject evil and choose good, he will be eating curds and honey; before that child has learnt to reject evil and choose good, desolation will come upon the land before whose two kings you cower now. The LORD will bring on you, your people, and your house, a time the like of which has not been since Ephraim broke away from Judah."

In all six cases, the translators of NEB chose the first option. Now consider another translation of the same verses: "He will eat (the sparse fare of) curds and honey so that he will know how to reject what is wrong and choose what is right. For before the boy learns how to reject what is wrong and choose what is right, the land whose two kings you now dread [Ephraim and Syria] will be abandoned. Yahweh will bring upon you, your people, and your father's house (bad) days, which have not existed since Ephraim left Judah. (That is, he will bring) the king of Assyria.

The two translations agree that Syria and Ephraim will soon be turned back, and they agree that the choice between good and evil is a moral one (C-1). But in the five other cases the second translation opts for the second option. We might paraphrase the

¹⁸ See Prov 30:19: "Four things I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, of a serpent on a rock, of a ship on the seas, and of a man and young woman עלמה [making love]."

meaning as follows. Little Immanuel will suffer through hard times, with insufficient food, and this privation will lead him to choose what is right over that which is wrong. By the time he reaches the age of discretion (3 years?), Syria and Ephraim and their threatening kings will be defeated. But this will be no reprieve. Rather, Yahweh will bring an invasion by a more serious enemy, which will lead to disastrously hard economic times. Yahweh will send the king of Assyria in judgment.

While I favor the second interpretation, I know that there are many competent exegetes who would agree with the NEB. The wider context has similar ambivalence. Lack of faith will result in Assyria's invasion of Immanuel's land in Isa 8:5-8--hence God is with us means God is with us in judgment. But Isa 8:9-10 says that "God is with us" will mean defeat for the "far countries"--hence God is with us to save us.

Clearly, it would be hard to sort all this out in a standard twelve minute sermon even if you used Power Point, assigned homework on this text the week before, and spoke with human and angelic voice. But it might be worth exploring in a sermon how a slogan like "God is with us" can be good news or bad, depending on whether God comes in grace or in judgment. It is "the rest of the story" that makes all the difference. The boy born to Mary relived the career of Israel. He came out of Egypt with his parents, delivered a Sermon on the Mount like Moses, kept the law perfectly, offered up his own life on the cross, rose again from the dead, and then promised in the final sentence of the Great Commission: "And remember, **I am with you** always, to the end of the age." That "I am with you" is clearly grace and not judgment.

An Isaianic Advent allows for a rich observance of the beginning of Year C in the liturgical calendar. It promises peace that passes all understanding (Isa 2:2-5). It

¹⁹ TEV: "By the time he is old enough to make his own decisions."

promises a spirit-endowed king who will be an advocate for social justice and whose reign will be marked by a transformation to non-violence in the animal kingdom and the ingathering of the nations (Isa 11:1-10). It announces a new age, in which the environment will be restored and disabilities will be undone, and in which the ransomed of Yahweh will experience God's nearer presence with great joy, as they practice conduct pleasing to God (Isa 35:1-10). And finally, it will remind us of the simplicity and profundity of the gospel, that can be expressed in the simple words "God is with us." And the best news of all is that we can share the reassuring promise, that God is with us in grace and not in judgment (Isa 7:10-16).