



Isaiah 9:1-7
Jesus Wasn't Born Under Your Tree
Hope

Rev. Brian North
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 First Sunday in Advent

This morning we start a new series of messages for Advent and Christmas titled, “Jesus Wasn’t Born Under Your Tree” that will take us through the end of the year. And while this *is* the start of a new series, it is really a progression of everything we’ve been looking at since the start of the fall. We began with a look at the opening chapters of Genesis earlier in the fall, then we hit the fast-forward button and skipped ahead to the lives of Ruth and Boaz who’s family lineage leads to King David and then all the way down to Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus.

And that brings us to today and this series as we move closer to celebrating the birth of Jesus. And in this series, all of our Scripture passages will come from Isaiah, still in the Old Testament. And the reason for this is that Isaiah, *perhaps* more than any other Old Testament book, has a number of prophetic passages and verses that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Isaiah is like a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. So it will point us to Jesus throughout this series, as we look at the traditional Advent themes of hope, love, joy, and peace.

I think it’s helpful to keep in mind that seeing Jesus as a fulfillment of the Old Testament is not my idea, and it’s not an idea of the Church. Jesus saw himself as a fulfillment of the Old Testament. For instance in Luke 24, we read, **“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself...Jesus said to them, ‘...Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:27, 44).** In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus says that he came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17); and in John, Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of me” (John 5:39).

So the Old Testament and the New Testament are inextricably linked together

through Jesus Christ, who goes out of his way to make that point several times in his life.

OK...with that lengthy introduction taken care of, let's dive into today's message. One of the great things that Jesus does is give us hope. **Hope is a part of being human.** Everyone, everywhere, has hopes and needs hope. For instance, most people would agree that at a deep level, they hope for love, joy, and peace – the themes of the next three Sundays. In some parts of the world, people hope for clean water, they hope for an end to disease or an end to war, and so forth. Some people hope for food on the table, a roof over their heads, and clothes on their back. Other hopes we have are more immediate and on the surface or even frivolous: Some people two days ago hoped for the Cougars to win the Apple Cup...which, as we found out, was probably about as likely as winning the lottery, another thing that some people hope for.

People hope for their kids to graduate from High school, we hope they'll go to college, we hope they'll call us and visit us when they're on their own; we hope for a job when we don't have one; we hope for good returns on investments, for good news, and for good health; we hope to remember where we put our keys, and we hope to remember why we walked from the living room into the garage. Speaking of good health and good memory...the story is told of an elderly looking gentleman, very well dressed, hair well groomed, wearing a great looking suit, flower in his lapel...This elderly gentleman walks into an upscale coffee shop. Seated at the counter is an elderly looking lady. After getting his latte, the gentleman walks over, sits alongside her, takes a sip, turns to her and says, "So tell me, do I come here often?"

An author wrote in Psychology Today three years ago these words about hope: "If I could find a way to package and dispense hope, I would have a pill more powerful than any antidepressant on the market. Hope, is often the only thing between man and the abyss. As long as a patient, individual or victim has hope, they can recover from anything and everything....Hope is the belief that circumstances will get better. It's not a wish for things to get better -- it's the actual belief, the knowledge that things will get better, no

matter how big or small.”ⁱ

So: From the basic needs, to deep desires, to the surface and the immediate, “hope” is an essential part of what it means to be human. It’s a powerful ingredient in life. And today’s passage is a powerful word of hope to those who first read it and to us today nearly 3,000 years later.

Today’s passage was written somewhere in the early 700’s B.C. These words were written during a period of exile when the northern part of Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C. The tribes of the northern kingdom were scattered about by the Assyrians, resulting not only in a period of exile, but a period of dispersion. It didn’t always happen this way. For instance, when the southern kingdom was conquered by Babylon several decades later, the Israelites were given their own single location in which to dwell together.

But these people were scattered, and were far from home. So this is a chaotic and disappointing time for the nation of Israel. Where they once were a great and strong nation with a bright future and good leaders like David and Solomon and others, they have fallen into ruin; they feel like they have no future and little to no hope.

Have you ever felt like you were without hope? That the future seemed so bleak, so pointless, so dark and terrifying that you had no hope? I know Gwen and I have had a time or two in our lives where we were almost without hope in regards to certain *facets* our lives: plans that just seemed to not be coming together, hurdles that seemed too big for us to get over. But in those situations, I would say the lack of hope was focused on a fairly narrow aspect of life. I honestly don’t know that I can say I’ve ever been in a place where I had no hope for the future.

Well, these people feel like they have no hope for the future. And into that comes these words. There are a couple things to know about Biblical prophetic passages. First, they aren’t so much about predicting the future, as they are about calling people back to God’s ways...back to a relationship with God. In fact, the “prediction” made is often what will happen if they don’t get back on track with the Lord, and so the hope is that the prediction

actually *doesn't* come true. Second, don't let the verb tense throw you for a loop because prophetic writings often will speak in the past tense, as a way of emphasizing that it will in fact happen, or mix the tense up – past, present, and future all at once. It's like the writer has a vision of what will happen, but even though that vision is of the future, it's like he's looking at it as though he's on the other side of that future, and it's a done deal...they people just haven't lived into it yet. We see this in the first verse of today's passage when he writes, **“There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress” (Isaiah 9:1)**. Future and present tense, right there. And if you're in a dark season of life, and you're feeling hopeless about your situation and your future, this ought to get your attention, and have us start wondering how this kind of hope can be ours, too. He writes of the people walking in darkness now seeing a great light...he writes of their nation being enlarged and increasing in joy...rejoicing at the harvest...that a child, a son, will be given...his name will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...And 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.” And by the way, this isn't going to be just a human endeavor that brings this about, because “The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

This was a hope-giving proclamation, for people who needed hope just to get themselves out of bed in the morning. I don't think we can really walk in their shoes or fully imagine where they would have been in life. And so the impact of these words on them is hard for us to fully grasp. But suffice it to say, these are words that would give them hope for today and hope for tomorrow, that their situation won't last forever.

And we have to remember that: **Although this exile is a physical reality for them, the problem that led to it is a spiritual one: Israel was wayward in their relationship with the Lord.** A little earlier in chapter 2, for instance, we read, “The arrogance of humanity will be brought low and human pride humbled; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will totally disappear” (Isaiah 2:17). So their relationship with God has gone south as they've turned to idols, and as they've allowed their own pride to get in the way of turning to the Lord. So God raises up Assyria to bring about

correction because the call of the prophets among them to live in a right relationship with God is largely falling on deaf ears. Isaiah 7:17 says, “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.” So Assyria ends up being God’s instrument of discipline, leading to the exile of the Jewish leaders, and the imposition of a new government in the land, from Assyria. And it all starts with their spiritual waywardness.

We see here that: **The problems we face in this world, the difficulties and challenges that come our way, often have a spiritual root to them.** Like the Israelites, our relationship with God goes south, because of our sin. And oftentimes there’s some correction and even some discipline that’s needed. And that stinks, no doubt about it. But every parent knows that discipline is needed in raising kids...and as difficult as it is for the child to receive it, it’s also difficult for the parent to give it. But the wisdom and love of the parent compels them to discipline the child, because an undisciplined child grows up to be an undisciplined adult who has no respect or care for others. And that’s not a very loving way to raise a child.

So God disciplines us. But in the midst of that he reminds us that the situation is not hopeless. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. There is a purpose for this. And there is hope in the midst of it. There’s hope for Israel even in the midst of their exile, which lasted about 180 years.

And about 700 years after this was written, Jesus comes into the world, and fulfills this prophecy in ways beyond what anyone could have imagined when it was written. In fact, to make sure people connected the dots on this, Matthew quotes part of the Isaiah 9 passage we read when speaking of Jesus. He writes, **“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:15-16).**

And so just as these verses from Isaiah 9 gave people great hope in the midst of the darkness of exile, Jesus fulfills them and brings great hope for us in the

midst of our lives – including when we're in our own times of darkness and exile because of our spiritual condition. God doesn't want to leave us in a place of exile and discipline forever; He wants to get our attention and bring us back to Him, back to relationship with Him with no idols before him. And before we think idols are just a thing of the past, let's not forget that things such as greed, pride, materialism and selfishness are all forms of idolatry. I think we have all struggled with one or more of those in our lives, and maybe especially around this time of the year as we consume ourselves with shopping. Sometimes, the correction and discipline we need is because of ourselves. But in the midst of that, God brings hope: He doesn't leave us, he doesn't forsake us, he doesn't stop loving us...and a new day will come where we are back in a right relationship with Him. He always welcomes us back. **No matter how long we've been walking in darkness, no matter how long we've been without the hope God offers, He always welcomes us back.** This is such good news, because so often in life we can be without hope and we don't even realize it. Everything seems to be going along well, things seems pretty decent in our lives...and yet at some point, if we're honest, we recognize that there's something missing, or worse, something happens that knocks us off the pedestal we've put ourselves on and we realize our inadequacy to fix things and our need for God to intervene in our lives.

A year ago, Gwen met a homeless guy down near the Seattle Center and got to know him some. His name is Willie. Because Gwen was down there regularly for a particular dance production that our daughter Brooke was participating in, Gwen saw Willie a few times. A few weeks after she had first met Willie, I had the opportunity to meet him. In fact, I had arranged that I'd meet him at Dick's Drive-in at the base of Queen Anne Hill.

And in my conversation with him, I was really struck by how much hope he had. In the face of homelessness, staying in shelters, sometimes sleeping in an alleyway, or park bench, or wherever he could find, Willie had hope. His disposition was good, he was amiable, he spoke frankly and honestly about his struggles with alcohol and his homelessness....but he was clearly not a hopeless man.

I asked him about that. I don't recall if I actually used the word, "hope" but I told him, "You don't seem concerned. You seem almost content in the midst of being homeless, when a lot of people would be really freaked out about the situation. What helps you stay that way?" And you know what he said? He said that his faith in Jesus is what allowed him to be that way. In other words, he had hope for the future because of Jesus Christ. Ironically, a big reason I met with him was to give him some food items that we thought would bless him and help him out – and give him hope: to know he wasn't alone, that people like us care, and so forth. But it turned out that he already had such hope for the future, that he told me that what he wanted to give the food away to others who were less fortunate than him. I was blown away. I mean, if I were homeless, I'd keep every morsel of food anyone gave me and hoard it for myself. I was blown away by Willie's generosity. And it was totally founded on the hope that he had in Jesus Christ: that he was going to be taken care of one way or another, in this life, and the life to come.

Look, we're all in a little different place on the spectrum of faith and on the spectrum of life. Some of us are rolling along greatly. Maybe you're in a place where you have to make sure that your pride – like happened to the Israelites – doesn't get in the way of your relationship with God. Or maybe you're at the other end of the spectrum and you're really down and have very little hope for tomorrow – let alone hope for a few weeks, months, or years from now. I don't know everything that each of you are going through or where you are. But: **Let this passage be a reminder that God does not abandon you.** He may be bringing you through a difficult time, or you may have stumbled into it all on your own, but there is a light that shines in the darkness, there is a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, a Prince of Peace who is working in your life to bring you to a new and better place: And that is Jesus Christ.

The author of that Psychology Today article wrote, "If I could find a way to package and dispense hope, I would have a pill more powerful than any antidepressant on the market." We should be grateful for the antidepressants he mentions there. I know people who cannot function without medical intervention in the form of antidepressants. But we also have to acknowledge that God has packaged and dispensed hope, and he's done it in Jesus Christ.

He is the child who's born, the son who's given who is our wonderful Counselor, Might God, Prince of peace...and Jesus is the one who gives us hope. It's a sure and certain hope not just because he lived at one time which we celebrate at Christmas, but because of his resurrection. Without Easter, Christmas wouldn't be what it is.

So: This Christmas season let the hope of Jesus be one of the gifts that you unwrap. Maybe even take an envelope or a box, and just put a slip of paper in it that says, "Hope," or "Jesus gives you hope." Maybe reference this Isaiah passage. You can address it to yourself, from Jesus. And when you open it, let it be a reminder to you that Jesus, the one whom we celebrate this Christmas, gives you hope: Hope for today, hope for tomorrow, and hope for eternity. Let's Pray...Lord's Prayer.

ⁱ "The Psychology of Hope" article from Psychology Today, found at:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reading-between-the-headlines/201307/the-power-hope>