



Isaiah 9:1-7
The Real Gifts of Christmas
“Hope”

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This morning we start a new series of messages for Advent and Christmas titled, “The Real Gifts of Christmas” that will take us through Christmas Eve morning, because Christmas eve lands on a Sunday this year. That night we will start a new series. So, plan on being here for morning and night on the 24th, to end one series, start the other, and help ensure that your Christmas celebration is centered on Jesus. In particular for the series that starts Christmas Eve night, I ask that you be praying about who God has put on your heart that might be ready to come with you to the service. Christmas Eve is a great opportunity to do that, and many people are open to the idea of coming to church for Christmas Eve. So, be praying about who God has put in your life, and be ready to step out in faith and invite them to join you when the opportunity presents itself.

But today we begin this Advent series that will bring us closer and closer each week to celebrating the birth of Jesus. And in this series, all of our Scripture passages will come from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. This last week at our staff meeting, I shared that I’ve never done a whole sermon series out of Isaiah. Then, in beginning to prepare for this one a couple days later, I realized that wasn’t true. I lied. Accidentally...so maybe not really a lie, but still. We did a short series out of Isaiah seven years ago! Since *I’d* forgotten that, I imagine *you all* have as well...and probably 40% or more of you weren’t even with us seven years ago, so you won’t know the difference, and it’s good for us to be spending some time in Isaiah again. It should be noted, however, that four Sundays in Isaiah is not much, given that it is 66 chapters long. We are just scratching the surface in this series. If you want more, join the zoom Bible study on Isaiah on Monday nights.

So, you may know that Isaiah is an Old Testament book. In fact, it was written somewhere in the early 700’s B.C. after 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 in a period of exile, and also a period of dispersion and separation. So, this is a chaotic and disappointing time for the nation of Israel – politically, economically, relationally,

spiritually and more. We might think that we've got some political, economic, relational, and spiritual challenges right now – and for sure we do – just be glad you aren't living in the northern Kingdom of Israel starting at about 722 B.C., because they had it worse, with no internet to occupy their time, and distract them from the pain of it all, either! ☺ They feel like they have no future and little to no hope as they are exiled, splintered, and scattered.

Maybe you've felt exiled in the past, or even feel that way right now.

“Exile” may not be the word you would have thought of initially, but perhaps, for any number of different reasons that each of us could identify if we went around the room...perhaps do you feel exiled by friends, co-workers, or family...or maybe you feel culturally exiled. Maybe it's social exile. Maybe it's economic exile. Maybe it's educational exile. Maybe it's political exile or religious exile. Maybe the color of your skin or your ethnic background makes you feel like an exile. Maybe it's collegiate allegiance exile – you root for Oregon State and Washington State Universities. That is a sad and unfortunate exile. Of course, if you root for the Oregon Ducks... well, we Huskies think you *should* be in exile. ☺ I say that with the love of Jesus in my heart, because I firmly believe in the power of the God-given gift of a smile or a bit of laughter...but the reality is: there can be a lot of serious things that might make us feel like exiles. At a minimum, you might be exiled from the reality you were once anticipating, and now that the future is the present, it's not where you thought it would be. Isaiah speaks hope into those situations. These are like gifts that God gives them in the midst of their exile, and now us, in the midst of difficulty, grief, and dark seasons of life. Let's see what he writes in **Isaiah 9:1-7**.

The word “hope” is not ever written here, but this is a passage that is all about hope. And, these people to whom Isaiah writes, need a message of hope...something to help them get through each day, to remind them that God still loves them and is on their side. And into that need comes these words.

Now, we don't want to let the verb tense throw us for a loop. Prophetic writings often will speak in the past tense, as a way of emphasizing that what

is prophesied will in fact happen, or they will even 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...the 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 past 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. How can we, in distress because of inflation or marital struggles, or a recent divorce, loss of a loved one, or health scares, or the challenges of raising kids in a seductive/secular world...how can we experience the kind of hope these verses bring?

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 this isn't going to be just a human endeavor that brings this about, because “The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.” God is going to do this because of his energy, his passion, his zeal for his people and his creation. **This is why it's such a sure and certain hope, that it can be spoken of as though it's already happened even though the event is yet to come as he writes: because God is the one who will do this.** His promises are sure and certain, “you can bet your life on it, rock solid”.

If you're putting your hope in anything else – politicians, the stock market, friends, family, your own abilities and talents...and there are a lot of really talented, highly capable people here on the Eastside and in our church...but whatever it is you're trusting in and giving you hope for the future, if it's anything other than the God of the universe who made you in his image, your hope is hopeless in the end. It's going to come up short. The promises of that stuff, ultimately, are empty. God's promises, however, are not.

And we see his promise coming to fruition, ultimately, in Jesus Christ. Let me say just a few things about Biblical prophecy and Jesus' fulfillment of it. 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).** In the language of the Old Testament, Jesus is the Messiah. He's the one who was expected to come to save and redeem Israel and establish a kingdom that would have no end.

Additionally, 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 5:39, Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures [Old Testament to them], because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of me.” So, Jesus *himself* saw the OT – not just the prophetic verses about a coming Messiah, but *all* of the Old Testament – pointing to him. He fulfills it all.

Lastly, as one person put it who I read this week said, “it's not that the original disciples or other early Christians saw Jesus fulfilling prophecies and then believed he was Messiah, it's actually the other way around! They first believed he was the Messiah and then started to re-read all of the Jewish scriptures in a new light. Their strong belief that Jesus is Messiah was the catalyst for this re-reading of the OT scriptures. Their starting point is...Jesus himself: his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension.”¹ This is why, when a person is exploring Christianity for the first time, and reading the

Bible to understand the faith, you want to start with Jesus in the NT. You don't necessarily read the Bible from beginning to end like most books. You start with the biographies of Jesus, because our faith really begins with him, and we understand the OT in light of him.

So, Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, and he is the fulfillment of this Isaiah passage. **Jesus is “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness 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” (Isaiah 9:6b-7).** In short: Jesus is the one who gives us hope. Jesus is hope embodied.

The hope he brings is for here and now, and for eternity. Where we are exiled from our Creator, Jesus brings us back into relationship with Him. That spiritual exile is exactly what brought the physical exile upon the Israelites. 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). They had turned away from God and turned toward idols.

It happens in our world, too. It's easy to pick on the world around us and say everyone *else* is spiritually wayward, that we've got it right just because we show up in church, or we've been baptized, or we serve in the church. As if that means we don't have any waywardness from God. And so we might say, “well, the problem is with everyone else. The world is totally sideways with Jesus.” Just this past week, Cameron Stedman, the band director at Kirkland Middle School who I work with in teaching elementary band students, he told me that with his 6th grade band they're working on a piece for an upcoming concert. It's a medley of a few different Christmas-related songs. One of the songs in this medley is “O Come All Ye Faithful.” Now, I don't know about you, but that's one of my all-time favorite Christmas carols and I think one of the most recognizable ones we sing in church this time of year. Cameron asked his 6th grade band students – maybe 40 of them or so? – how many knew the song, and *not a single one raised their hand*. Not even one. So, there's spiritual waywardness “out there” for sure. We Jesus

followers are in the minority. But that doesn't mean we aren't sideways with God sometimes. It doesn't mean we don't have seasons of exile that are brought on by clinging to idols of power or greed or personal ambition and glorification.

Remember, in Isaiah's day, the people who were exiled here were God's people, the Israelites. He didn't exile Babylon! He didn't exile Assyria! He didn't exile the Romans later! It was Israel, his own people. The waywardness was in "the church" we might say. We might have times of exile brought on by spiritual waywardness as well. Where are we looking for hope and clinging to idols of different kinds rather than putting all our trust in the grace, power, love, forgiveness and supremacy of Jesus? Where are we wandering off from God?

The good news of Christmas, the good news of Jesus Christ, is that he seeks us out...has come to us, and that *he* is our sure and certain hope. *He* is our wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, and prince of peace. **We have hope in Jesus not just because he was born and lived, but also because he died on the cross and was raised from the grave.** That's what convinced the first Christians that he was the Messiah and then opened their eyes to see how he fulfilled the OT prophecies. And once you find your hope in Jesus, that's a hope that can never be taken away. That's a hope that isn't dependent upon your own efforts. That's a hope that can't let you down. That's a hope that has overcome the grave. That's a hope that is unstoppable. That's a hope that is so sure and certain, built on what Jesus has *already* accomplished, that you can live into it here and now, and right on into eternity.

And I pray that this hope...this gift that Jesus himself is and that he gives, is one that you've already opened in your life. If you've kind of set it aside and wandered away, and started putting your hope in something else, I pray that you might rediscover it this Christmas. If you haven't received Jesus and his gift of hope before, I encourage and invite you to know the hope that Jesus gives through putting your faith in him. Because the light of the world, Jesus the Messiah, has overcome the darkness. You need not walk in spiritual darkness or have hope that falls short anymore. Jesus is the only hope you

need; “the zeal of the Lord has done this,” and it’s his gift to you this Christmas and always. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ The way this was worded, I couldn't help but just copying and pasting. It came from a reddit conversation I came across about OT prophecy in regards to Jesus:
https://www.reddit.com/r/AskBibleScholars/comments/bjvucd/what_would_be_considered_the_most_convincing_old/
So, although I can't vouch for the author, I do know enough to know that what he writes is accurate, and he simply stated it so well I decided I couldn't phrase it any better myself.