

I. Intro

A. Let me start by wishing you happy third week in Advent – and then warn you that today may end up feeling more like Good Friday than Christmas.

1. That is not the worst thing because technically speaking, Advent is supposed to have a bit of that feel. It is supposed to be a bit dark. It is supposed to capture some of the hopelessness and weariness that was in place before the Messiah finally shows up. Technically speaking, Advent and Christmas are not the same thing and we are not supposed to celebrate Christmas until Christmas.

2. But, there are bigger problems in the world than people getting Advent wrong. So all I am going to do is say, having a bit of Good Friday feel is OK. And that is a good thing because in our quick overview of some of the prophetic passages in Isaiah, we come arrived at Isaiah 53 – which is dark.

B. Last week I noted that alongside telling people to do the right thing – to love God, serve others, care for the poor, be generous, advocate for widows and orphans, tear down unjust systems - that alongside their main job of “forthtelling,” the prophets did a bit of foretelling as well – they peered around the corner to announce what was coming.

C. I further noted that they did the foretelling for two different reasons:

1. One was to provide hope. To assure people that God wins – that His Kingdom will come.

a) I noted that it’s a crazy moment, with storm clouds on just about every horizon. On the international front we have an expansionist Russia and nuclear North Korea, with a near nuclear Iran, war in the Middle East, China doing all that it is doing and more flash points than that.

b) And on the national stage we have lots of confusion and anger and debt and significant dysfunction in government and higher ed.

c) And that closer to home we each have other challenges. There is a lot of loneliness and depression. There is unemployment or underemployment or cancer or loss.

d) So, last week I noted that some of you – who have put your weight down on Jesus, who believe in the promises of God - need to be reminded of the promises of God. You need to be reminded that this ends well. That eternity changes everything. That His kingdom will come. That the one who came as a baby will return as a king.

e) And to that end we looked at Isaiah’s description of a world restored. Where the lion lies down with the lamb and the child puts her hand in the viper’s nest and is OK.

2. One of the reasons the prophets tell us what is coming is to provide hope to those who believe. A second reason the prophets tell us what is coming is to validate that the rest of their story is true. To say, “you need to be paying attention to the other things I am saying.” It is to say – you need to pick a lane and it needs to be this one.

a) I noted that there are lots of metanarratives out there:

(1) The classic ones: Plato, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche.

(2) Other religious claims: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Atheism.

(3) More recent players – the Postmodern additions growing out of Foucault and Derrida or the newer additions coming out of Critical Theories.

b) I said, Look:

(1) They can all be wrong, but they can't all be right. You need to pick a lane.

(2) Some of you have this random set of beliefs that are so internally inconsistent and incoherent that they would have gotten you laughed at at virtually any point in the last three thousand years.

(3) I said, you need to pay attention to the conversation that has been going on since the Greeks and Romans and place your bets on something viable. Pick a lane that has a chance.

c) To that end;

(1) We handed out the book I just wrote. It's called *How Do You Know?* which explores the idea that we have to decide how we are going to decide. (We need to make sense of our epistemological options. How are we going to prioritize our feelings versus traditions versus reason versus religious claims).

(2) And I rehearsed some of the messianic prophecies we find in the Bible. Claims that point to Jesus.

(a) These start in Genesis 3 – seed of woman

(b) But there are many others. In Genesis 49 we learn that the Messiah will be from the tribe of Judah. In Micah 5 that he will be born in Bethlehem. In 2 Samuel 7 that he will be a descendent of David.

(c) Two weeks ago – in the first sermon in this series, based out of Isaiah 9 – we saw that the casual reference Isaiah made to a savior that would be from Galilee but sit on David's throne – would have made no sense at the time Isaiah gave it, because you couldn't come from Galilee (which were the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali) and sit on David's throne. But that is what Jesus did.¹

(3) Last week I made note of some specific ways Jesus fulfilled the prophecies given hundreds of years before he was born, and I also reminded you of the way he floods the categories.

(a) Jewish government gets organized around prophets, priests and kings – he is the perfect fulfillment of all three offices.

(b) Jewish life revolves around the Temple and sacrifices - he is the ultimate on both fronts.

(c) We've been in the Book of Exodus – where the Jewish people are saved by supernatural gifts of water and bread from Heaven. And Jesus parades around telling people he is the living water and the bread of life.

(4) The book holds together in profound ways. When you pay attention you will find yourself saying: “wait, they said that back here. And then this happens here? How could they know back here that this was going to happen?”

- D. So, last week I made note of two of the reasons for prophetic passages.
1. To provide hope for those who believe, but who need to be reminded what you believe and why.
 2. And to try to get the attention of those who have yet to pick a lane.
 - a) By the way, let me pause here to say that in early January I will be doing another six-week discussion group for those who want to explore the life of Jesus.
 - b) It’s or those who do not believe or for those who have just stepped over the line. It is very safe. If you want an invitation – or know of someone who might want an invitation.
 - c) If you want an invitation to that study, you need to fill out one of the connect cards with your name and email on it and note that you want more info on the study or talk with someone at the welcome center, or email me directly.

II. Today we turn to Isaiah 53 - a famous passage about the “man of sorrows.”

- A. As you are turning there, let me note a couple things by way of background.
1. You already know that: 1) Isaiah was a major prophet – that is, that he wrote a lot; and 2) that he lived 2,700 years ago, around the time of the fall of Israel, the destruction of Jerusalem.
 2. Part of what you need to know to understand this passage is that there were three Old Testament motifs made about the Messiah.
 3. He was described as a victorious military leader and as a powerful king - both of which: 1) are captured in allusions to King David; and 2) both of which get the attention of the Jews.
 4. He is also described – as he is here in Isaiah 53 - as a suffering servant.
 5. The Jews give this aspect of the prophecies about the Messiah a lot less attention. That is not surprising.
 - a) For starters, most people ignore the parts of the Bible they don’t like.
 - b) Secondly, it is very hard to reconcile all three of the motifs. A victorious general and powerful king go together, but it’s hard to combine those with a suffering servant.
 6. What do Jews do with Isaiah 53? Christians read this and say, “this is talking about Jesus on the cross. How can Jewish people not see this?” My experience is:
 - a) Most are not familiar with it. On one of my trips to Israel I ended up in an hours long conversation with an orthodox Rabbi. Fascinating on many fronts, but best I could tell, he hadn’t read it. Indeed, to my shock, he seemed to spend far less time reading the Bible than he did other books – the Talmud and Mishnah.

b) Some who are familiar with it, view the passage as talking about Israel not Jesus. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is not talking about a person but about the Jewish people.

B. OK. Enough of that. Let me back up to the end of Isaiah 52 and start reading.

III. V.13: **Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.**

A. Some say the three-fold chord here – prosper, be exalted and be very high - refers to the resurrection, ascension and the exaltation of Jesus. Maybe. I am not sure. Remember, in Hebrew the poet rhymes ideas not words. So you get the same point made from different angles.² I'm not sure we can say this means three different things. That said, it doesn't matter. We certainly see that trajectory unfold in Christ's life.

1. This is what we see in Philippians 2:5-11. Have this attitude in yourself, which was also in Christ Jesus, who although he existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature^{bl} of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...

2. This is what we see in the opening lines of Hebrews. In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...

3. This is what I try to capture in the first chapter of *The Life of Christ*³ book – simply noting that Jesus is the most significant person who ever lived – and then trying to delineate his accomplishments. To objectively delineate how this is true – which, by the way, is something that others are doing in very thoughtful and serious ways.

a) Tom Holland's book – Dominion

b) Ayaan Hirsi Ali's recent conversion

4. More music and books and art and acts of service.

IV. **Just as there were many who were appalled at him¹—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness—** It is likely we are hearing here of his face after he had endured the Roman scourging, the beatings, the blows, the crushing of the crown of thorns upon his head. By the time he was impaled on the cross, his face was a bloody mess. It was jarring.

V. **so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.**

VI. Now we cross to chapter 53, which starts with a description of Jesus' strange rejection.

VII. V1 **Who has believed our message (report) and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?**

A. Note that the Gospel is presented as a report – as history. It's not science or philosophy. It's not intuition. It's not a fairy tale. (It doesn't begin, "a long time ago in a far-away land.") The account is presented as history. As news. Good news. But news.

B. And the question here is: Who affirms the story? Who believes? Who puts their weight down? Who starts to live their life in light of the bigger story being told?

VIII. Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a tender shoot (a young plant). This seems to speak of Christ's hidden years in Nazareth when he worked in his father's carpentry shop, and the only one fully dialed into the story was Mary.

IX. And like a root out of dry ground; This is what looked at this last week in Isaiah 11. We were focused on the idea that Jesus would be descended from the lifeless stump of Jesse. **And like a root out of dry ground, He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.**

A. We are being told that Jesus did not have Hollywood good looks. There are pictures of him in circulation which present him as a handsome European male with kind eyes and great hair. No.

1. By the way, there is no reason to think Jesus had long hair. That comes from confusing the Nazarite vow to not cut hair with the fact that Jesus was from Nazareth. They are not related.

B. I'm not sure Jesus was naturally ugly. I think part of what is being pointed to here is the fact that he is horribly beaten and then crucified.

X. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. As noted earlier, this does not read like the all-powerful conquering hero you might imagine the Messiah to be if you were focusing only on the parallels with David.

A. But it does sound like Jesus. Someone who was very alert to the pain all around him – especially of the poor and outcast.

B. He would have had his own pain:

1. the disparaging comments (about his mom's infidelity, about him being demonic or a drunken glutton or crazy);

2. the challenges of being poor (remember his comments to John's disciples, "Foxes have holes, birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.")

3. he had the emotional pain of being a caring holy man surrounded by pain and corruption;

4. on the cross he would have suffered physical pain.

XI. Reading on: V4: Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering. Here we get straight up Gospel allusions – references to the substitutionary atonement. This is why I said today may feel more like Good Friday than Merry Christmas.

A. The essence of the Christian faith is not this I do, but this He did. It is not me being good enough. It is me recognizing that I cannot be good enough and embracing the grace of God.

B. We are saved by grace through faith – it is not a result of our efforts. It pivots around the Great Exchange in which we give Jesus our sin and he gives us his righteousness.

C. By the way, please do not miss that Peter copies this passage in his first letter. In I Peter 2:24 he writes, "He bore our sins in his own body upon the tree," (1 Peter 2:24). He is citing this passage and saying it point to Jesus.

XII. yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, Note, he does not suffer for his own sins. He has none.

XIII. he was crushed (bruised) for our iniquities; (bruised is a clear throw back to Genesis 3, where we read that the Seed of woman (Jesus, the one born to a virgin) will get in a fight with evil and his heel will be bruised;

XIV. the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. Do not miss the fact that Christ's death was a Roman death. He was not stoned. What we get here is a description of being stripped, whipped and then nailed to a cross – which was not done at the time Isaiah wrote this.

A. Crucifixion was not invented until more than a hundred years later than this was written – by the Persians. The Romans didn't invent it, they just perfected it.

XV. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; Again, we are the guilty ones. We are the sinful ones. We seldom see our sin for what it is. This is one of our chief problems. The Bible says, "the heart is deceitful above all things." We lie to ourselves first.

A. Some people do not even get close to seeing themselves clearly.

B. I recently read *The Sign of Jonah*, a one act play written by Gunter Rutenborn – a German playwright - in 1960. It retells the story of Jonah using World War II as a backdrop. It is trying to figure out who is to blame for the horrors of World War II. It starts out with the suggestion that Jonah was to blame – parallels are drawn between Jonah's nationalism (he doesn't want the Ninevites saved) with German nationalism. Initially Jonah is on trial. Then it becomes the German people. In the end, God is found guilty – and is told he has to show up and live among us.

C. That is the story many tell today. The Bible makes it clear that we are to blame.

XVI. and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Again, this is the Gospel. God is holy so he cannot dismiss injustice. But he is loving so he takes it upon himself. The unthinkable plan is that God becomes one of us in order to bear the punishment we deserve. As Tertullian said, "we believe because it is absurd." No one would think to make this up.

XVII. V7: He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; Theologians make much of the fact that Christ's sufferings were not primarily physical. No doubt the physical pain was real, but that paled compared to the shame of sin and the separation it caused.

A. Here we are noting that he did not complain. He did not say anything. He was not interested in defending himself.

B. If you look at the trial – and really it was trials – he does not defend himself. He is not interested in escaping any penalty. This amazed both Pilate and Caiaphas. He was silent before Herod. All of which makes it clear that trials are a joke. It was held at night – which was illegal. And several times Pilate will say that he cannot find anything wrong with him.

XVIII. he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

XIX. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people, he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

A. Jesus is crucified - which was considered so bad, the Romans didn't write about it. And a Roman citizen could not be subject to it.

B. So, he is with thieves. But... he will be set in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Instead of throwing his body on a rubbish heap, as the authorities intended, they "made his grave with the rich."

C. Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, offered to put the body of Jesus in his new tomb that had never been used. Someone has put that rather remarkably, "He who came from a virgin womb, must be laid in a virgin tomb."

XX. Let me land the plane here. I want to be sure you are amazed by the right things. By Jesus. The fact that all of this was written 700 years before it happened. All the fulfilled prophecies are important and worthy of note. But don't get too hung up there. The most amazing thing is that God loves you enough to die in your place.

¹ Isaiah 9:1 says that "in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations" Matthew quotes this verse in Matthew 4:15 when Jesus begins his teaching ministry in Galilee. In Isaiah 9:6 it talks about this son that was given (John 3:16 also talks about a son that was given) and then it says in Isaiah 9:7 this son "will reign on David's throne". You can't come from Galilee, the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali and rule on David's throne. Unless, your parents live in Galilee but they are of the tribe of Judah and must go to Bethlehem the city of David for your birth due to a census. Jesus perfectly fulfills this passage by being the honor in Galilee but being from the tribe of Judah to rule on David's throne.

² There are other word plays that go on in Hebrew – including the use of rhyming of words – but most of that gets lost in translation.

³ G.K. Chesterton, that remarkable English novelist and literary critic, said it this way: "There was a man who dwelt in the East centuries ago, and now I cannot look at a sheep or a sparrow, a lily or a cornfield, a raven or a sunset, a vineyard or a mountain without thinking of him. If this be not to be divine, what is it?"