

Remnant Life Church
December 1, 2024
At the Heart of Christmas is Hope
First Sunday of Advent
Isa 9:2-7; Matt 1:22-23; Rom 15:4

Scholars vary on the number of prophecies in the OT regarding the coming of Jesus

- But the number is usually set at approximately 300, give or take a hundred
- Few, however, are as well-known as what the prophet Isaiah wrote over 700 years before the birth of Christ
 - For a bit of perspective – that would be like Pope Clement V writing in 1309 that a man living in the 20th century would one day preach to hundreds of millions of people and fly to many of those destinations all around the world
 - In the 1300s there were approximately 70 million people alive on the entire planet
 - It has been estimated that Billy Graham preached to around 215 million people during his ministry
- But what makes Isaiah’s writing even more important for us today is what the circumstances were when it was written
 - Isaiah writes of the coming of a King in the midst of intense gloom and darkness
 - The world is steeped in sin, and the full weight of having turned their backs on God is being keenly felt
 - Does that sound familiar to anyone?
 - But what Isaiah wrote was something the Jewish people desperately needed in that time, just as we need it today – HOPE
 - A message of hope for them that one day someone would come to make all things right and restore what had been broken
 - And that message is still true for us today
 - For them, that hope would be fulfilled in a stable in Bethlehem with the birth of Jesus Christ
 - For us today we continue to watch and wait in faith
- Over the next four weeks, we will look at what is truly at the heart of Christmas
 - Peace, Joy, Love, and this morning, Hope
 - I’m certain there are many who feel we could use some hope this Christmas

The reason we have hope at Christmas is not because of the twinkling lights, decorated trees, special songs, or gifts

- It is because of Jesus Christ
- And the prophecy written by many of the OT prophets kept hope alive for those who were struggling through those periods of darkness because of sin
 - Again, that should bring with it a sense of familiarity
- Isaiah’s account is one of the most familiar, in large part due to a 17th-century composer by the name of Georg Friedrich Handel

- It was the prophecy of Isaiah that served as not only inspiration but part of the text for his most well-known work today, *The Hallelujah Chorus* from his oratorio *Messiah*, written in 1741.

READ – Isaiah 9:2-7

The backdrop of Isaiah’s writing is best understood within the context of poor leadership

- The Kingdom of Judah had been under the headship of 3 corrupt kings
 - Uzziah – Jotham – Ahaz (**2 Kings 15-16**)
 - The first two did some things that were pleasing to God
 - But they never removed the places of pagan worship, and the people continued to offer sacrifices to Baal and Ashtoreth
 - Of course this was in direct opposition to God’s commandments of worshipping only Him and never making any images to worship
 - Rather than be an example of God’s love and righteousness they led the people away from God
 - As a result, there was not only in great spiritual darkness, especially during the reign of the third king Ahaz, but the people were hurting from the consequences of their sin

This passage in the 9th chapter of Isaiah makes two major statements

1. It acknowledges the brokenness and darkness the people find themselves in because of sin
 - a. This was important for the people to see as they so often refused to address their sins
 - i. As we consider what Isaiah wrote it is feeling more and more like he is holding up a mirror for how life is lived today
 - b. Confession and repentance of sin is always the first step toward healing and reconciliation
 - i. **I John 1:9** - *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*
 - ii. **I Chron 7:14** - *...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*
2. His second statement is that it offers the hope of One who would bring light into the darkness and make all things right
 - a. The kings of Judah in the time of Isaiah were not following God
 - b. Sin always brings consequences often called darkness
 - i. In the previous chapter 8 Isaiah records that God is going to use the Assyrian army as an instrument of His punishment against Judah
 - c. But the words of chapter 9 were also written to remind the people of a very important truth – God had not forgotten about them!
 - d. And He still loved them

Matthew also recounts Isaiah's writing

- Jesus' disciple, later in his life, makes the connection between what the prophet had written and what had taken place in Bethlehem

READ – Matthew 1:22-23

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

- What is the "all this" Matthew is speaking of?
 - It is the lineage of Jesus down through the ages
 - And the appearance of the angel to Joseph in a dream telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife
 - God had not forgotten about His people!

But it would not be easy

- Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, had a very difficult decision to make
 - Mary, who Joseph is engaged but not married to, is found to be pregnant
 - Now today that is not considered to be anything unusual
 - In that day, however, Mary would, at best, be ostracized from the town where she lived. At worst, she could be stoned to death.
 - We know that Joseph was a good and righteous man
 - So much so that he still wanted to protect Mary
 - Rather than make a public spectacle in order to save his own reputation, he plans to call off the wedding quietly
 - Until God intervened
 - God sent an angel to tell Joseph everything was happening just as it should
 - Do not be afraid!

One of the reasons that Christmas resonates in our hearts is because we, too, live in a land similar to that of Judah

- Our world is dark and corrupt because of the preeminence of sin
- And the church has more and more been willing to take a back seat to the culture of this age
 - We should be ashamed as the children of God for how we have allowed sin to become something that we not only do not rebuff but now embrace
 - The world is filled with war, disease, conflict, and oppression
 - And there is only one source of light that can pierce this darkness
 - That is Jesus Christ, and He lives in each of you as His child
 - Do you let that light shine as a child of God, or do you keep it hidden in fear of what people will think?

But hope also requires one other thing – patience

It took 700 years for the words of Isaiah to come to fruition

- How patient are you when it comes to the prayers and promises of God in your life?
 - Have you ever decided that God was taking too long and took matters into your own hands?

- How did that work out for you?
- If you will be patient, God's plans are always best for you – but you must wait!

There is a plant that grows in the southwest desert of the United States called the Agave Americana - also known as a century plant. It thrives in rocky, dry, and mountainous desert locations and has leaves that grow to be a foot wide. This plant can reach ten feet in diameter and grow to be six feet tall. Perhaps its most unusual trait is its long reproduction cycle. For 20 to 30 years, this plant remains the same height and produces no flowers. But toward the end of its life, without warning, a new bud will sprout resembling a tree-trunk-sized asparagus spear. It will rise into the sky at a rate of up to seven inches per day until it reaches a height of 20 to 30 feet. Then it culminates with a crown of several clumps of yellow blossoms that last for three weeks.

So why is Isaiah's prophecy read almost every Christmas season?

- It is because seeing the faithfulness of God in the past gives us hope for the present and unwavering trust for the future.
- Paul made an appeal to the church in Rome to recognize this and it is our encouragement for today
 - **Rom 15:4** - *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.*
 - Paul is saying that all we read written in the past - meaning the prophecy and the fulfillment – is meant to teach us to hold onto our faith in God to answer our prayers!

As you continue to hope today for whatever you are believing, remember this...

- God is always right on time
 - Many times it is that challenge of waiting on him that requires the lion's share of our hope
 - But He knows exactly what you need, when you need it, and what form that answer must take

There is hope for our world today!

- It is not a worldly government
- It is not a famous preacher
- And it will not be found in an emerging tide of social awareness

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*