

*But there will be no more gloom for God's people who were in anguish.
In the old days, God brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
but in these last days, he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has shone.
You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of Israel's burden, and the staff on his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as in the day of Midian.
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be on his shoulder,
and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of his peace there shall be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish and uphold it with righteousness and justice from this time forth and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Isaiah 9:1-7

"To Us a Child is Born, To Us a Son is Given"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

One of the strange things about having served as a pastor for so long is that my upbringing was as much political as it was spiritual. On the wall in my parent's bedroom was a crucifix, Jesus on the cross, but right next to the Lord was a black and white photo of Jack Kennedy. My Irish Catholic mom had us in church every Sunday, and my Irish Democrat dad had us in front of the six o'clock news every night after dinner. It follows that one of the reasons I love the Bible is that God's Word doesn't portray the men and women God uses to change the world as dreamy mystics, untouched by the give and take of politics and human nature.

Isaiah, the man whose prophetic words about Jesus we read earlier in the service, began his ministry with one of the most mystical visions recorded in Scripture. Great warrior angels thundering back and forth in old Israel's temple, "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God of hosts!*" But Isaiah did not go on to become some sort of desert mystic. He was likely a priest, likely from a noble well connected family. Time and time again, we read of Isaiah strolling boldly into the presence of one of Israel's kings with tough messages from the Almighty where spiritual truths confront political realities.

And the prophecy we read tonight was no exception. We typically read the words of Isaiah 9 as a dramatic expression of hope and light over and against a background of existential and spiritual darkness. God is sending us a Child, a Son who will be wonderful things and work wonderful works that will somehow existentially brighten our weary, wounded, confused souls with an inner brilliance and wisdom and power that will bring healing and direction and purpose to everything we do. And that is all true, that is exactly what the birth of Jesus brings into play if only our eyes will see, and our ears will hear and our hearts what God has sent us.

But these existential, spiritual promises Isaiah saw on the way some 700 years before Christ didn't come to him entirely apart from the political and physical realities Isaiah was facing when he saw them. Just before all this wonder came into play, Isaiah 8 shows us the prophet shutting down his ministry because old King Ahaz had failed to listen to a word Isaiah had to say. "*Bind up the testimony! Seal the teaching!*" Isaiah had cried out to that small group of disciples who had gathered around him in the Holy City.

There was no point holding forth in the temple square when the movers and shakers Isaiah was trying to reach were all caught up in the political rumors and gossip and innuendo of Ahaz's failing kingdom. God told Isaiah and his disciples to knock off with this bunch. "*Don't call conspiracy what these people call conspiracy. Don't fear what they fear. Don't be in dread!*" "*To the teaching and to the testimony!*" Isaiah challenged his disciples, "*If they will not speak according to this Word, they have no dawn.*"

The point being that when the movers and shakers go south, when the high and mighty won't listen, God's people need to choose between his promises and life's disappointments, his truth's and life's delusions. Isaiah goes on to teach that the twists and turns and swirls of hardhearted, hotheaded human opinion will only draw our eyes to the ground and our hearts into the dark. And it's then that the old prophets lifts his eyes and looks into the future for hope. The future he tells us will arise in the north, not in the Holy City where the high and mighty live, but out on the hillsides and beaches overlooking the Sea of Galilee. The prophet began to sing: "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great Light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a Light has shone.*" The darkness Isaiah sings about is likely more than just spiritual and existential. It is likely that when he sang this, Assyrian shock troops were assembling in the Golan Heights, about to overrun the fishing villages and hillside towns where Jesus would wander 700 years later.

What we read tonight was only an abridged version of Isaiah's song. I typically leave out the bloodstained verses in this passage because I don't have time to explain all the blood and fire at late night holiday services. The darkness Isaiah sang about was a brutal, violent tsunami about to invade old Israel across her northern border, and what he's promising God's people is that even after the Assyrians have done their worst, God will save and heal and redeem them from the darkness old King Ahaz had brought their way.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be on his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." All the damage all the world's big, bad tyrants will subject us to will be undone by a Child who was still centuries in the future when Isaiah sang this song. And he will be wonderful, Isaiah promises, powerful, timeless, both royal and peaceful, a combination seldom ever seen in the ancient world. But, most important, the Savior Isaiah was promising was human, political, *"... the government shall be on his shoulder."*

In other words, whatever existential comfort the Christ Child has to offer us, he will also change our hearts so that the way we live changes the facts on the ground. God is not offering us a salvation that is purely, only personal. He was sent not just to heal and redeem our personal wounds and injuries, but to teach us a way of life that will heal and redeem and straighten all the wrongs and injuries and injustices that sin has introduced into human society, beginning inside us but continuing on and out until the world is the just and peaceful, honest and holy garden he meant for us to make it when he put us here.

And the place that begins is Church. God designed and the Bible teaches a sort of sacred politics, a way of doing business and getting things done that if we actively practice it here in Church it will change the world. It follows that it is not politics that has made public life in our country so crude and bitter and twisted and unjust. It is sin, sometimes intentional, sometime negligent that has rendered us unable to talk, unable to plan, unable to agree. And the Child in the manger was sent to teach us better. The government is on His shoulder...and ours if we belong to him.