

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, December 23, 2007

“Prince of Peace”

Isaiah 9:6

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It's a truly tough job being a prophet. In fact it most likely is the toughest job in the whole world. No one knew that better than Isaiah.

Most people think that the prophet is one who “foretells.” Quite to the contrary, primarily a prophet is one who “forth-tells.”

The “pro” portion of the word “prophet” derives from the same root as the word “pronoun”—meaning “in place of.” This stands in contrast to the root of the word-part “pro” which means “beforehand.”

The second word-part of “prophet” derives from the Greek word “phanai”—meaning “to speak.” Thus, a prophet is one who “speaks in place of.”

God gives a specific message to a prophet and then expects the prophet to share that message—to forth-tell it—with power and authority on God's behalf. Yes, from time to time a part of what the prophet “forth-tells” may provide a prediction. But such predictions do not constitute the primary responsibility of the prophet's ministry. It's a truly tough job being a prophet.

Virtually no one likes the message of a prophet. Most of the time, the prophet declares doom and gloom. The prophet tells the people that they need to make some amendment in their way of living. They need to make changes. And, no one, no one likes changes, especially when those changes affect the status quo of one's own life.

God tends to send a prophet during a time of great distress. Whenever His people find themselves in a time of conflict, God sends a prophet to remind the people of what they need to do in order to find their way out of their problems. At least that's what God did all throughout the Old Testament.

Fortunately, the prophet does not only emphasize the negative. Not only does the prophet proclaim the changes that people must make in their lives, he often gives them specific visions from God of hope. As God directs, the prophet shares with them a panoramic view of what can be and what will be. He gives them a message of hope.

The people often greatly admire the prophet and also consider him a little odd. They would stand in awe that this man spoke on behalf of God. But, they also thought he was at least a bubble and a half off plumb. You know, a little goofy.

Almost every family has a goofy relative or two. You know what I mean. “Good old Uncle Medford. Quite a guy, Medford. Brilliant, you know. But the elevator doesn't quite make it all the way to the top floor.”

Well, Isaiah was just like that. People stood in awe of him. After all, he was a cousin to the kings. He had status in the community of Jerusalem. He was widely acclaimed to be the smartest man in town. And, yet... “He says goofy things. He talks about changes we need to make in our lives. He talks about a coming golden age. Just goofy.”

Not only that, Isaiah made people mad. He said things that pushed them over the edge. He riled them up. He caused them to turn away in disgust. He made them indignant. He turned them crimson. He evoked anger. He evoked hatred.

"I didn't come to the temple to hear bad news," some people would shout as they stomped away in anger. "Why if that's the kind of message I'm going to hear every time I go to temple, I'm going to stay home. I would far rather talk a walk in the desert and commune with nature than listen to what that Isaiah has to say."

Isaiah was not a popular guy. He was respected, even feared, but not very well liked. His message of repentance struck too close to home. His message of hope seemed too difficult to really believe. His message didn't "tickle" his listeners' ears.

Isaiah lived at a time of great conflict. God's chosen people had divided into two kingdoms. Ten tribes occupied the land to the north. Two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, occupied the land to the south, including Jerusalem.

The ten tribes of the northern kingdom—generally called "Israel"—had strayed far away from God. After failing to listen to a host of prophets, including, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Amos, and Hosea, God's wrath was about to fall on them. In just twenty short years from the time Isaiah began his prophetic ministry to the southern kingdom, the Assyrian's would carry off the kingdom of Israel into captivity. For all intents and purposes, the ten tribes of Israel, as a body of people, would pass off the face of history.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, the people vacillated in their faith. Sometimes, they drew very close to God for a time. Later they would turn their backs on Him. They did this over and over again.

I think God had a special place of patience for the southern kingdom. I think he held such patience because of their forefather, Judah. When Joseph's brothers plotted to kill him, Judah was the one who convinced his brothers not to do so. Even though they sold Joseph into slavery, Judah's intervention kept them from killing him. Ultimately, God used what they intended for evil as a means of redeeming their whole family from the great famine.

As a result of His great love, God deals very kindly and graciously with Judah. Among His gracious acts: He sent Isaiah to speak on His behalf. And, not just for a little while, either. Isaiah serves as prophet for nearly 50 years. The 66 chapters of the book that bears his name contain some of the most profound truth in the Old Testament.

Judah was surrounded by conflict. With Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south, every waking day the people of Judah wondered whether or not a great army from one nation or the other would swoop down and devour them.

Oh, they tried various acts of diplomacy. The king formed an alliance with Assyria. But, that alliance always teetered on the brink of collapse. They tried to play politics with Egypt, too. But, that only left them in a state of instability.

We really cannot understand what it was like to live in Judah in 740 BC. For the most part today, we live at a time that has the appearance of relative calm. "How dare you say that," you may respond. "Why we're at war in the Middle East. We live in fear of terrorist attacks. We have borders flooded by undocumented immigrants. We have skyrocketing fuel prices. We have ever-burgeoning tax bills. We have global warming, or global cooling, or global something. How dare you say that we live at a time that has the appearance of relative calm. Why I haven't been calm in quite a while now!"

Is that so? Really?

Today among us in this room we have a number of people born during or before the year 1930. Those of you in this category have a much better sense of what Judah faced during Isaiah's day than the rest of us. Why 1930?

Well, if you were born during or before 1930 you would have been at least 12 years old when we, as a nation, joined World War II. You would remember what it was like during that time. You would remember rationing. You would remember going without certain items in order to support the war effort. You would remember what it was like to have many men known to your family serving overseas. You would have sensed the sorrow, as family after family in *your* neighborhood received the dreaded telegram reporting the death of a loved one in conflict.

You folks born since 1930, do you realize that over 70 million people died as a result of World War II. That's right, 70 million. Why the United States, alone, lost over 400,000 men and women during the 3 1/2 years of that conflict. The war affected the lives of every single person in this country. Every day, every single day, people were surrounded by reminders that we were at war.

That's what it was like in Judah. A constant, unrelenting sense of tension; a continual sense that something bad is about to happen. And, here comes Isaiah, speaking a message of repentance, but also a profound message of hope:

1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan-

2 The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow
of death a light has dawned.

3 You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as men rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

5 Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

6 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.

7 Of the increase 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.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

Can you see how Isaiah's words stirred the people? Can you imagine the questions his words raised?
"When, Isaiah? When will this happen? How soon will this son appear?"

How do you suppose they would have responded if he had been able to answer them, "Err, ahhh,
well, in about 740 years."

Remember a moment ago when I suggested we live at a time that has the appearance of relative
calm? The operative word is the word "appearance." We live at a time that has the *appearance* of relative
calm.

The truth is that all around us a battle rages. It is not a battle of terrorists vs. Americans. It is not a
battle with Al-Qaeda. It's not a battle of foreign armies against the United States military.

It's a battle of the forces of Darkness against the forces of Light. It's a battle of everlasting evil against
eternal good.

And, you and I, my dear one, you and I are caught in the middle of this conflict. The principal
weapon of this battle is one that is pervasive. It is consuming. It is unrelenting. It is unending. It is totally
overwhelming. That weapon is "sin."

You probably have never thought of sin as a weapon that might be used against you. You may think of
sin only in the abstract.

You may have learned during your confirmation class that in the Garden of Eden the first man, Adam,
took of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and willfully ate it. In so doing he broke the
one rule God had given him. He sinned. And, the curse of that sin has passed down from generation to
generation all through the ages to us. From the moment we were born, we entered this life already cursed by
sin. Every moment of our lives from that day to this have only confirmed the curse of that sin. We live lives
immersed in sin.

In contrast to this horrible news about "sin," during that confirmation class you also learned that in His
great mercy and grace, before the foundation of the world, God loved us and chose us to belong to Him. He
made provision to satisfy the penalty of sin through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross of Calvary. Through

the shedding of the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, God has forgiven our sins. Once and forever, we are forgiven. God has adopted us. He has grafted us into His family. Now, we belong to Him. Forever!

We now stand before Him forgiven. But while we are no longer subject to the penalty of sin, we remain in a sinful and fallen world. Every day we are subject to the consequences of sin, the effect of sin. And, sin is pervasive.

Our enemy uses sin to entrap us, to torment us, to pummel us, to aggravate us, to discourage us, to badger us, to annoy us, to beat us up. Satan does this because he wants to rob us of our joy. He wants to subject us to sorrow. He wants to make us forget that we belong to the Kingdom of God. He wants to trick us into thinking all is lost.

He doesn't just beat us up. He also uses the weapon of sin to try to lull us into complacency, to trick us into believing the unbelievable, to make us think that things are different than they really are, to blind us to the spiritual war that wages around us, to give us a false sense of comfort, a false sense of calmness, a false sense of, well, peace.

But, our enemy only produces illusions. He only offers tricks. He only gives us vapors: nothing real; nothing lasting; nothing honest; nothing permanent; nothing stable.

What can we do? What remedy do we have? How can we turn and find protection from this attack? How can we find peace? Who calls us to repentance? Who proclaims to us this day a message of hope?

From 740 BC, Isaiah's words come forth. He points us to the Lord Jesus Christ. Hear his words.

It is as if Isaiah stands in the corner of the stable in Bethlehem. He hears the first cry from the mouth of the Incarnate God. He sees the wonder in the eyes of Mary and Joseph. He watches as they lay the baby Jesus in the manger. He observes the visits of the shepherds and the wise men from the East. He sees the wise men nod knowingly to each other. And, he knows what they know, that this is the Son of God. This is the promised Messiah. This is the one who will rule on David's Throne.

Then, it is as if Isaiah stands at the foot of Calvary's cross. He looks up and sees the Son of God stretched out on that Roman vehicle of torture and death. He sees the nail-pierced hands and feet. He sees the crown of thorns. He sees the parched lips. He sees the agony in our Savior's brow. He hears that horrible cry, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" Shaking in fear and wonder, Isaiah hears those words of Christ, "It is finished!" And, he watches Jesus die.

Then, it is as if Isaiah stands beside the Garden Tomb on that first Easter morning. He sees the women come and cry out in wonder that the great stone has been rolled back from the tomb. He hears the words of the angel speak to the women, "Why do you seek the living among the dead. He is not here. He is risen, just as He said."

And, at last, it is as if Isaiah stands on a hilltop at the end of the age. He watches as John's words from Revelation chapter 1 verse 7 are fulfilled: "Behold He comes with clouds. And, every eye shall see Him. And, they also who pierced Him. And all the nations of the earth shall wail because of Him."

Isaiah sees and knows. He observes and he understands. He perceives and he tells. He proclaims. He "forth-tells." Isaiah speaks in behalf of the God of the Universe. From the depths of all that God has revealed to him, Isaiah trumpets his message of repentance and hope from the housetop:

6 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.

7 Of the increase 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.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

In a sentence, the message of hope I've been trying to share with you today, goes something like this: "To resist the attack of sin, hold fast to Isaiah's promise and allow the Prince of Peace to rule in your heart, in your mind, in your soul, and in your strength." Let me say that again, "To resist the attack of sin, hold fast to Isaiah's promise and allow the Prince of Peace to rule in your heart, in your mind, in your soul, and in your strength."

"Okay," you may say on this Sunday, two days before the celebration of the birth of our Savior, "how do I do that. How do I hold onto Isaiah's promise? How do I grasp his message of hope? How do I allow the Prince of Peace to rule my emotions, my intellect, my spiritual life, and my physical being?"

Fair question. Let me make a suggestion. The best way to learn how to allow the Prince of Peace to rule in your life is to get to know Him more completely.

Let me suggest that starting today—after all, why put this off to tomorrow—take just fifteen minutes this afternoon and begin to read the Gospel of John. That's right. Take fifteen minutes and begin to read the Gospel of John. Take a look at your watch, or set your kitchen timer, or mark the time in some other way, and read from the Gospel of John for just fifteen minutes.

Why fifteen minutes and why the Gospel of John?

Well, I suggest fifteen minutes because doctors who study the way our brains work tell us that when you purposely concentrate on something really important for at least a quarter of an hour, it kicks your brain into a mode that somehow registers that what you are doing is serious enough to remember. Sounds silly doesn't it. But, it's true, nevertheless. So, plan to spend fifteen minutes reading.

I chose the Gospel of John because the vast majority of that book contains Jesus' actual teachings. What better way to get to know Him more completely, than to spend time reading what He wanted His disciples to know and do.

Tomorrow, set aside another fifteen minutes to read from John. Do that every day this week. Oh, I know that on Tuesday you might be too busy opening presents, preparing or eating Christmas dinner, and so forth. But, what better activity to do on the day we remember the birth of our Lord than to get to know Him more completely.

Okay?

As we soon celebrate the birth of our Savior, and as the new year approaches, I share with you this day a message of hope: "To resist the attack of sin, hold fast to Isaiah's promise and allow the Prince of Peace to rule in your heart, in your mind, in your soul, and in your strength."

Let us pray.