

Text: Isaiah 9: 1-7  
Title: Picking up a Thread  
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Roger Allen Nelson

Who is Isaiah writing about?

When Isaiah writes that “to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders,” who is he writing about? When Isaiah names one who “will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” who is he writing about?

Who is Isaiah writing about?

And, why is it important?

That’s our task this morning.

Some historical context....

When this first section of Isaiah was written the Israelites were split into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah. One people, two kingdoms. But, in about 720 BCE the northern kingdom (Israel) fell to the Assyrians, and while some Israelites escaped to the south and sought refuge in and around Jerusalem, most were carried away into exile. Then, with one kingdom gobbled up and the next in their sights, the Assyrians continued their push south to conquer Judah and Jerusalem.

A word about Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is a city on a hill and a section of the south end, sort of in the shape of Florida, is perched between two steep ravines. David’s residence is thought to have been at the top of that south end and from there you can easily look down into the houses and rooftops that are terraced and stacked up on top of one another. Think David spying on Bathsheba....

Archeologists have uncovered high fortress walls to the north and deep valleys and walls to the south. Jerusalem would not be taken easily. So, as the Assyrian marshaled their forces, Hezekiah, the King of Judah, entered into both negotiations and preparations to save Jerusalem.

At the south end of Jerusalem there’s a spring that fed a pool outside of the city walls ~ thereby offering a source of water for the Assyrian troops that would gather to storm Jerusalem.

Therefore, II Chronicles records this decision,

*When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and that he intended to make war on Jerusalem, he consulted with his officials and military staff about blocking off the water from the springs from outside the city, and they helped him. A large force assembled and blocked all the springs and the stream that flowed through the land. “Why should the kings of Assyria come and find plenty of water?”*

To block access to water Hezekiah built an interior tunnel that diverted the flow of the spring and kept the water inside the city.

And today, or just last week, if you're not claustrophobic you can climb into a spilt in the ground in the City of David and, with clear cool water running over your feet and up your shins, you can traverse the tunnel that Hezekiah built through the bedrock under the city. This carved-out-of-rock-curved-narrow-pitched-dark tunnel is about 530 meters long with a gradual grade downward that eventually spills into the pool of Siloam inside the city walls. And archeologists think Hezekiah's men started digging at both ends and figured out how to eventually meet in the middle. Remarkable...

The result: Jerusalem had water inside the city, while the armies of the Assyrians were bone dry. And although it is a lot more complicated than this, eventually the Assyrians turned toward home and Judah and Jerusalem are spared.

Who is Isaiah writing about?  
And, why is it important?

Isaiah prophesies, in part, during the reign of Hezekiah. In this first section of Isaiah there are multiple places where the word of the Lord, through Isaiah, is directed toward Hezekiah and concerns the king of Assyria. And in II Kings this assessment of Hezekiah's reign is offered:

*He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places and smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake that Moses made, for the Israelites had been burning incense to it. Hezekiah trusted the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses...*

You get the idea.

Dear friends, despite Frederick Handel putting this text to music in the Messiah, and despite the traditional answer that it must be about Jesus, Isaiah was probably writing about King Hezekiah. (Or Josiah, or the eternal reign of some other Davidic king...) But it is highly improbable that he had in mind a child born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth and killed on a cross outside of Jerusalem ~ some 700 years later.

My recent trip to Israel was led by a gifted theologian-historian-archeologist who sported a wide brimmed leather hat ~ think a young Harrison Ford in search of the Holy Grail. And, while we spent a good deal of time listening to Palestinians and Israelis about the current conflict, every day we visited biblical sites to consider the scriptural texts, weigh the historical and archeological evidence, and eventually wrestle with the nature of scripture.

One afternoon, in the West Bank, just outside of Bethlehem, as we were sitting in the shade on rocky ruins, our leader was talking about prophetic texts in Daniel. Another tourist happened by, listened for a few minutes, and asked if he could offer a word. He then launched into an explanation of the book of Daniel that detailed...

how this thing lined up with that thing,  
and how this came true here,  
and how that corresponded there,  
and how one dispensation followed the other,  
and how all the interlocking pieces fit nicely together.  
Until confident that he had shed light on darkness, he wandered off.  
I sat there a little stunned at his *chutzpah*.

For some the Bible is a puzzle. And faithful Bible reading demonstrates how the pieces all fit together with no discrepancy or disagreement. There's a particular conviction that scripture is without error and without inadequacy. And, therefore with some confidence prophetic books, like Daniel or Isaiah, serve a predictive function. And, our text is read as evidence of Jesus. Our text is one piece of the puzzle.

That's one way to read scripture. Let me offer another.

A few times on month on Wednesday mornings a delightful gaggle of Hope women gather in Fellowship Hall to work on quilts. They give these quilts to friends and family, to those who need encouragement, to those who are sick, and to the women and children in the Roseland Christian Ministries shelter ~ which currently houses 9 women and 19 children.

I quietly slip in and out on Wednesday mornings but I have noticed that these quilts are colorful collaborative projects. With a design in mind for the eventual recipient, some cut fabric, some iron, some pin, some stitch, and some quilt. (I think there is a difference between stitching and quilting...) And there are beautiful patterns and textures and colors and all sorts of threads.

I think it's more helpful to think of Bible as a colorful collaborative quilt than a puzzle. The Bible stitches together disparate voices and genres and perspectives that overlap and intersect and compliment and contradict and leave out and overstate and take a different angle and argue with one another. There are knotty knots and asymmetrical pieces. There are beautiful patterns, textures, and colors but there are also loose ends, complicated messes, and pieces that don't neatly fit.

Therefore, faithful Bible reading is sorting out the kinds of fabric, and the limitations of the stitching, and to tease out the threads that run throughout quilt. It is to let individual passages speak in their own context and look for themes that are woven throughout the whole quilt.

To quote Doug Bratt:

*... (we) are wisest when we focus on what God does and promises to do through this unidentified child instead of trying to identify him. Certainly, there's enough beauty and hope portrayed in this text to last for a very long time.*

*After all, Isaiah speaks of God bringing light into the varied darkness that plagues and haunts God's whole creation. He describes the kind of joy that is part of the most appropriate response to God's work and works, yet sometimes is in such short supply.*

*The prophet describes the freedom from oppression that God promises to give through God's mighty son. He also lays out a vision of peace for a world that's often soaked in blood. Isaiah even speaks of God's instituting the kind of justice and righteousness that seems like an endangered species in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That's a vision that all of God's adopted sons and daughters can get on board with....*

Dear friends, we read scripture not because it is a magical puzzle that needs to be figured out but because it is a colorful collaborative quilt that can be read with wonder and the confident-open-ended-joy of the Spirit's activity. So, while there is no mention in the New Testament of the list of names in our text, and no New Testament writer quotes these lines, there is still a tradition that rightly picks up this text as a thread that runs throughout scripture and attaches it to Jesus. And that is to say that prophetic imagination is not so much predictive as it is a thread which runs back to the very heart of God.

And, therefore....

no matter what the distress,  
no matter what the gloom,  
no matter what the darkness in which we wander,  
Isaiah offers a glimpse into the way and will of God....

*...on those living in a land of deep darkness a light has dawned....  
For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his  
shoulder. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting  
Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there  
will be no end.*

Even so, come Lord Jesus.  
Amen.