

1st Sunday after Christmas Day
26th December 2021

Isaiah 9:1-7

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Misplaced Hope

Good morning, church family. Welcome to the Sunday after Christmas, the day that, along with the Sunday after Easter, are always the most well attended Sundays in church of the whole year. So first, a word about this morning's reading. This is the lectionary text that's always given for Christmas Eve. It's read alongside the more familiar and beloved Christmas story from Luke chapter 2, telling of the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn.

So, while this excerpt

from Isaiah gets read a lot, and sung a lot more than that, thanks to Handel's beautiful Messiah oratorio, it's a text that I've never actually preached on in 21 years of ministry. Through the past couple of months, though, we've been following the narrative lectionary and listening to readings from Israel's prophets. Especially, trying to hear them not as predictions of a certain person—Jesus—but trying to listen in context, to try and hear what the prophets were saying to their own communities that might also be a message for us today.

Isaiah, in this morning's text, is writing to a people in national darkness. He is addressing a community in despair and mourning. As I was writing this sermon, I just finished reading an article in Newsweek about a 73-year-old Vietnam Vet who lives in Georgia, Mike "Wompus" Nieznany. In the interview, he is already planning to join tens of thousands of fellow militiamen in 2024 to violently invade the capitol should Trump lose the election. He is tired of the Democrats destroying the country and ready to violently take it back. He talks openly about how eager he is for Civil War. As that kind of rhetoric becomes more frequent, and is encouraged by national leaders, I find myself becoming despondent about the future of our country.

Isaiah is himself addressing a community of people

who were fearing an impending war with its ensuing violence and disruption of their lives and families. They were looking for some sign of hope. So, this felt like a text I needed to explore this week, even if I was preaching on it two days too late.

The text begins by naming two cities—Zebulun and Naftali. Those two cities were in the northern part of what's now modern-day Israel. And they had both been destroyed by the invading Assyrian army, the most powerful military of the time coming from the east in what's now Iran. Isaiah and his listeners were further south, but they knew that the Assyrians were headed their way. It must have felt like a ticking time bomb to them.

So, Isaiah prophesies... your darkness will turn to light. Light is dawning. Joy

is around the corner, just like the joy you experience at the harvest, or when you win in battle and divide the plunder, or as your ancestors rejoiced on the day of Midian. What was the source of Isaiah's confidence? There was a new king in town, a king named Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was going to take over the nation and make everything better. He was the one who would drive away the Assyrians, who would, dare I say, make the nations of Israel and Judah great again. I don't say that to suggest Hezekiah was like one particular political leader in our time. But the idea that just putting the right person or people in power would solve all the country's problems...my guess is that many of us, regardless of our political affiliation, can relate to that kind of hope.

Unfortunately for Isa-

iah's listeners, their hope was misplaced. Because the Assyrians did make their way south, conquering and destroying cities, shattering families and communities in their path. On the one hand, this just seems like a depressing story from Isaiah, so maybe a fitting story for ending 2021. On the other hand, maybe there's still something hopeful to take from this reading.

I find myself increasingly despondent with political angst. I'm torn because I want to be informed about what's going on in our country and our world, but every time I read the news, I can literally feel my blood pressure rising and my heart beating faster. More than that, I can feel myself growing in animosity toward my political opponents, especially when reading articles like the one from Newsweek, and especially

when those opponents open espouse a readiness to take up arms against those of us who would cast our votes differently.

And I wonder if we are making the same fallacious assumptions about political leadership that we find in Isaiah. If we can just get the right person or people elected, whomever they may be, then we can finally relax knowing our country is headed in the right direction.

I think one of the dynamics at play is that we feel bound up in the narrative of our country. We want the story to turn out this way or that way. But we also recognize that for most of us, our individual power to affect the outcome of that narrative is extremely limited. I read an article a few weeks ago in which the author opined that we spend 90% of our emotional energy

worried about national and global issues we are largely powerless to affect and the remaining 10% on local concerns where we actually have some potential to encourage change. His suggestion was that we would all probably be a lot healthier if we could swap those two numbers.

That's easier said than done, I know. And there may be a few reasons for that. One is because focusing locally, whether that's in our church, or our relationships with family or friends, or our community, local focus requires us to do something...to work at a relationship, to participate, to volunteer, to show up. It requires effort and work on our part that fretting about national politics does not. We can do that from the comfort of our bed or couch as we read the news with a cup of coffee in hand.

Another reason it's easier to focus on politics is because, as columnist David French suggests, "compared to virtue in real life, virtue in politics is easy. Compared to love in real life, love in politics is also easy. By Facebooking about the right policies or Tweeting about the right candidates, we can, for example, serve the homeless from a distance. We can exalt the virtues of the working class without actually knowing the working class. Even our donation dollars—as valuable as they are—can permit us to keep human pain at arm's length."

So if we know that our energies are misplaced, if we know that pinning all our hopes for a better future on the right political leaders is no more a guarantee of brighter days ahead than it was for Isaiah's listeners 2600 years ago, what can we do? What is our calling

as a small caring community of people in East Tennessee who come together to, among other things, hopefully work and worship together in ways that can make a positive impact on our lives, our relationships, and our community?

I do believe that part of the answer is exactly what we are doing here this morning—coming together as a community. Coming together around a set of shared values and a belief that we are not powerless to make a positive difference, and that we can do so in loving and life-affirming ways that don't involve violence directed toward our neighbors or our enemies.

That's where I think we can find some hope in Isaiah's words this morning. Podcast host Curtis Chang talks about hope as "locating oneself within a larger story, specifically a story that has a

past that fills us with longing, a future that pays off on that longing, and then a present that engages our energies.” To be hopeful, he says, is to “inhabit this story, especially with others who share this story.”

Isaiah does try to locate his listeners within a larger story, albeit one of previous national victories to begin with. But when the hopes of military victory are dashed, Isaiah later moves on to a different vision of hopefulness. And it’s a vision I think we see very clearly lived out in the child born to us that we celebrate this Christmas.

If part of the answer to finding hope in a time of national crisis is locating ourselves within a shared narrative, then I think the critical question is which narrative we choose. Focusing all our energy on national politics leads us into a narrative of military power and might—

the very kind of narrative embraced by the Vietnam Vet in the Newsweek article.

But there’s a different narrative we celebrate at Christmas. A narrative of a child born into a family with no military or political power, no money, no influence or social clout. But who nevertheless made a powerful and world changing difference in the lives of those around him.

He did so by:

building relationships with those around him;

spending his time among friends;

noticing the inherent value of everyone he encountered;

insisting that all were loved by God.

There are better narratives than war and violence to draw us together as community—narratives that can give us not just a uniting

purpose today but hope for tomorrow. That's one of the things I appreciate the most about church community... that it's one of the few places outside of family gatherings where we can experience intergenerational community in a way that brings together stories of the past, relationships in the present, and hopes for the future. A community such as our offers us all a chance to experience that kind of community whether we have the same opportunities with biological families or not.

In fact, that's what made the early Christian communities so unusual... they identified as a family of choice...referring to one another as siblings, sharing meals regularly, sharing financial resources. The Christmas story that we share as a family is not just about one child born in God's image...it is about a

community of people who all bear God's image and who all carry the hope for healing and love of neighbor and enemy alike that we find embodied in that child.

To quote David French again, "With that hope as a contrast, politics rightly seems small and weak, even though it does contain its own causes and narratives. The thrill of political combat or the hope of an inspiring campaign can provide a sense of purpose, but it's a thin gruel compared to the holistic impact of a loving family, of deep friendships, and of a healthy church...

...[W]hen your neighbors are hurting, understand that so very many are suffering from wounds that politics cannot heal, that even your most fierce convictions shouldn't stand in the way of grace, and that a lifetime of posting and tweeting is of little consequence compared

to the concrete action of reaching out to those who feel so very alone.”

That’s a Christmas story that brings me hope. In this celebration of the Incarnation of God, I see that incarnation lived out in communities such as this one. May the narratives of love and hope be our guiding stories as we work together in this place to be a light to one another. Amen.