

What Are We Waiting For?

BY CLAUDE F. MARIOTTINI

Through images of the mountain of the Lord's house, the peaceful kingdom, the desert highway, and the child Immanuel, the prophet Isaiah describes the coming of the new son of David and establishment of God's reign. The use of Isaiah's oracles in the Advent liturgy help Christians prepare their hearts for the advent of Christ.

Of all the prophets of the Old Testament, none has influenced the Christian understanding of the life and ministry of Christ more than Isaiah. The writers of the New Testament and the early Christians used Isaiah's oracles to shed light on the birth of Christ, his character and person, his ministry, and his suffering and death.¹

Many passages from the book of Isaiah have become firmly established in Christian imagination to form a basic understanding of the gospel message. Isaiah proclaims the coming of one who will call the people to prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3). He describes the mission of one who will proclaim the good news to the poor (61:1). He proclaims the coming of a kingdom where people will forge their swords into plowshares (2:4), where the wolf will dwell with the lamb (11:6). Isaiah also speaks of the suffering of the Servant who will be despised and rejected by many (53:3), but through whom the will of the Lord will prosper (53:10).

During the Advent season, Isaiah speaks again and his oracles about the promised Savior give a clear indication that Advent had its origin in the hopes and hearts of people longing for God. As people of faith meditate on Isaiah's words and his vision of the Messianic age, they will realize that Advent finds its completion when it reaches the hearts of those who are waiting for God's coming in the person of his Son.

Isaiah speaks about the "mountain of the LORD's house" (2:1-5), the peaceful kingdom (11:1-10), the desert highway that is a "Holy Way" (35:1-10), and

the child whose name is Immanuel, “God with us” (7:10-16). Isaiah’s words describe the coming of the new son of David and the establishment of the reign of God. The use of Isaiah’s oracles in the Advent liturgy helps Christians prepare their hearts for the advent of Christ.

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD’S HOUSE (ISAIAH 2:1-5)

This oracle begins with a holy place and an assembly of many people. The reason Isaiah’s message has a great appeal as part of the Advent liturgy is because Isaiah is “a prophet who sees God’s salvation affecting all nations and people.”²

Isaiah’s message is for the “days to come,” the time when the Lord will come to establish his kingdom. With the end of the monarchy in Judah, the prophetic vision became the hope for the coming of the Messiah.

In Isaiah’s vision of the future, the mountain of the Lord’s house will be established as the highest of the mountains. It will become a conspicuous place from which the word of the Lord, his Torah, will go forth to the nations and attract people wanting to receive instruction from the Lord. By comparing the pilgrimage of the nations to the flow of a mighty river, the prophet implies that multitudes will come to Jerusalem to learn God’s word.³

The words of Isaiah reflect a desire to turn to the true God and embrace his teachings. Desire to seek God’s house and be taught God’s word reflects people’s dissatisfaction with their way of life and their eagerness to obtain the kind of spiritual insight that comes through knowing the true God.

When nations come to know God, they will allow God to arbitrate their differences and, as a result, peace will be established. The nations will crush their swords and transform these implements of war into tools of peaceful living. Isaiah saw that when God’s kingdom is established, there will be an end to wars; nations will stop their contentions and establish peace.

Isaiah’s statement that a nation shall not lift up a sword against another nation is a remarkable vision of universal peace—a peace only possible in the kingdom of the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). In the Prince of Peace’s rule “there shall be endless peace” (9:7).

Isaiah’s vision has not yet been fully realized, but a time will come when God’s peace will prevail: “My peace I give to you” (John 14:27). Until then, the house of Jacob and the people of the Messiah are urged to walk in the light of the Lord (Isaiah 2:5).

This is the reason Christians must be “ready to proclaim the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15). For, when people are taught God’s words, they come to understand the evils of war and the benefits of universal peace. When people obey God’s teaching, the living of the gospel will produce peace among the nations and in the hearts of people.

Isaiah’s vision presents an alternative view of reality, a time and a place in which wars cease and violence gives place to peaceful resolution of conflicts. The season of Advent challenges us to live and proclaim this vision. Jesus’

gospel of peace is the means by which this alternative to war and violence can become a reality in the world where the church lives and does its work.

Through the proclamation of the hope that Advent brings to the world, God will bring together all estranged nations, separated by wars and strife, and establish a kingdom of peace and justice among the nations. What Isaiah saw as God's will for the future can become a vision that changes things in the present.

God's people must not walk in the nations' errors but in the light God provides for them in his word. It is in God's word that people learn what they must do and how they must live. Through the message of Advent, God encourages and empowers the Church to proclaim and practice peacemaking in our society and around the world: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

THE PEACEFUL KINGDOM (ISAIAH 11:1-10)

This prophecy of Isaiah begins with a fallen tree. The tree represents the monarchy established by David which lasted until the deportation of the royal family in 587 BC. The fact that it is fallen represents the divine judgment that came upon the house of David. Yet, the same prophecy speaks of a shoot coming out of Jesse's stump—and it is here that we observe the power of hope. The prophet proclaims that God will bring hope into the hearts of people who suffered the horrors of war and lived many years in the agony of hopelessness and despair. The shoot that comes out of the fallen tree represents the restoration of the house of David, a sign indicating that the house of David will survive and accomplish God's purpose in the world.

The coming of the ideal Israelite king is an announcement of what God will do in the future. Isaiah's oracle promises hope to a people in despair. The Kingdom of Judah's humiliation when the son of David, the king ruling in Jerusalem, was taken into exile will be transformed into exaltation when the new son of David makes his appearance in the manger of Bethlehem. The new son of David will emerge from the fallen tree and establish a kingdom of peace and righteousness.

In preparation for his work, the king will be endowed with a sevenfold gift of the Spirit of the Lord. The Spirit's anointing will allow the new king to rule in righteousness and restore peace to all creation.⁴ Due to the reign of this Messianic king, peace will prevail. Peaceful coexistence between humans

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and the animal world will be restored as it existed in Edenic times. This renovation of creation will be made possible because the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord “as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

The future king will establish justice and righteousness. This was God’s and the people’s expectation of all Israelite kings:

For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

Psalm 72:12-14

As a judge, the king will make decisions without compromising justice. He will not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear. As a just king, he will judge the cause of the poor and will decide with equity for those who are in need.

The shoot that grows up from the stump of Jesse will become a banner to the nations, a sign drawing people together for a common cause. All nations shall come to him looking for guidance. The New Testament appropriates Isaiah’s imagery to relate his message to the life and ministry of Christ. The writer of Matthew understood the branch (Hebrew *nēcer*) to be a reference to Jesus Christ as the Nazarene (Matthew 2:23).

Advent is a time of change. When Isaiah announced the advent of David’s son, creation changed. The advent of Jesus Christ also brings change. Isaiah’s vision challenges Christians to embody the actions of this son of David, whom Christians identify with Christ. Christ’s ministry showed his love and compassion for the poor and the needy.

During the Advent season we must again realize that Isaiah’s vision for the Messiah has not yet become a reality. Advent challenges the Church to accept God’s call to minister to a world in need and challenges Christians to become the bearers of good news to the poor and the marginalized of society.

Isaiah’s oracle provides many challenges to Christians during this season of Advent. First, it calls Christians to believe that God can bring new hope to seemingly hopeless situations. If a shoot can sprout out of a fallen tree, God can bring hope out of despair. Second, God can bring peace and harmony to a world in conflict. If God can make wolves live together with lambs, he can also eliminate the enmity that exists between nations and transform old enemies into friends. This process of reconciliation can only happen when people live in the power of God’s Spirit, because it is the Spirit who endows people with the wisdom and understanding necessary to exercise restraint in their dealings with one another.

According to Isaiah's oracle, the judgment of God's people is overturned by the promise of a new beginning. The new shoot will emerge from the fallen stump of Jesse; a remnant will be redeemed and purified. God will be faithful to his promise to David that his throne will be established forever (2 Samuel 7:16).

During Advent we affirm once again that in Christ, God's purposes will be fulfilled through a people he chose for himself—a people who will live the gospel message before the nations of the earth. In the end, people will lift their voices and proclaim together with the people of Jerusalem, "Hosanna to the Son of David" (Matthew 21:9).

THE DESERT HIGHWAY (ISAIAH 35:1 - 10)

This oracle is the continuation of a theme developed in Chapter 34, which announced God's judgment on Judah. Chapter 35 announces the restoration of God's people, their return to Zion, and the renewal of the land through which they will travel back to Jerusalem. Isaiah's message deals with God's advent to redeem his people from their exile in Babylon. God's coming means the renewal of creation. Because of God's work, the wilderness will rejoice and the desert will blossom.

In his oracle, Isaiah announces that the coming of God will be accompanied by a complete transformation of the desert through which the people must travel to return home and by a change in the physical and spiritual life of the people. Isaiah begins by describing God's rehabilitation of the land. The land was an arid wilderness. Such a description serves to emphasize that the desert was a wasteland, barren and desolate. However, the barren and desolate land will blossom when it receives water. Then, that which was dead will come back to life; that which languished will be restored. The same care God shows for his creation, he will also demonstrate to his people. To the people who said: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (Ezekiel 37:11), God will come to provide hope, health, and a new life.

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The news of God's coming was good news for those hopeless because of their exile in a foreign land. The oracle tells that God is the one who will heal their physical disabilities (cf. Psalm 103:3). Blind eyes will be opened, deaf ears will hear again, those unable to walk will leap like a deer, those unable to speak will sing for joy.

Isaiah announces that God has prepared a highway in the wilderness, which the people returning from exile will travel on their way back to Zion. God's people will walk on this desert highway, which is called "the Holy Way" or "The Way of Holiness."⁵ The name is important because this highway is the work of the Holy One of Israel and the way the redeemed people will travel. Because of this, the highway has limited access; only

those redeemed by God may travel on it.⁶

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in the desert, along with the unclean and those people. God's people will travel without fear because God will be with them. The return of God's people to their native land will be a glorious occasion, with singing, joy, and much celebration.

The people of God returning from their exile will experience the joy of deliverance and rejoice in what God has done for them. In the same way, there was great joy in the coming of the Son of God. The message to the shepherds was a message of joy: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). This good news of great joy empowers the Church in its mission to transform society.

In his oracle, Isaiah announces that God is preparing a highway in the desert for his people. When God comes to do his work, both the land and the people will experience God's healing and restoration. In the fullness of time a voice cried: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3; cf. Luke 3:4 and parallels). And when Christ came, he also transformed lives. Because of his coming, the blind received their sight, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed, the deaf heard, the dead were raised, and the poor received good news (Luke 7:21-22).

The message of Isaiah is that the coming of God to redeem his people will bring life and vitality to the world and make a difference in the lives of those who live with spiritual and physical limitations. This is the same message the coming of Christ brings in the Advent season. Many people enter

The highway in the desert is Isaiah's favorite image to describe the return of the children of Israel from exile.⁷ On this special road, prepared for the ones whom God redeemed and purified, the people will journey back to Zion and none shall go astray. Those who have not been redeemed by God will be barred from this highway

the season facing economic difficulties, physical limitations, and relationships scarred beyond their control. The coming of Christ announces that in him we find both physical and spiritual restoration. The Son of God has entered human history, taking upon himself our humanity, that he might be “able to help those who are being tested” (Hebrews 2:17-18). In the Advent season, we are called to trust in God’s power to renew and bring wholeness to our broken lives.

THE CHILD IMMANUEL (ISAIAH 7:10 - 16)

Isaiah’s oracle about the birth of the child Immanuel must be understood within the historical context of the prophetic announcement. The announcement of the birth of a child representing God’s presence was made at a time of great crisis for the people of Judah.

Isaiah’s oracle was given to Ahaz, king of Judah. It assured the king and his nobles of God’s help and protection at a time when Jerusalem was under attack. The conflict known as the Syro-Ephraimite war took place when Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin king of Syria tried to force Ahaz into joining an alliance against Assyria.

When Ahaz was preparing for war, God sent Isaiah to reassure the king that God would protect Judah from the threat they were facing. The message Isaiah was to deliver to Ahaz was that the invasion would not happen (Isaiah 7:7). Isaiah warned Ahaz that unless he believed in God’s promise and stood firm in his faith, he would not stand at all (7:9).

Ahaz refused to believe Isaiah’s message. God sent Isaiah a second time to Ahaz, and again the king refused to hear the words of the prophet. Then the Lord gave a sign to Ahaz that foretold the exile of Israel and Damascus. The sign is described in verse 14: “Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

A few months after Isaiah spoke these words, Assyria deported a large section of the population of Israel and Damascus to other parts of the Assyrian Empire. The deaths of Pekah and Rezin were the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. As Isaiah had predicted, the invasion did not take place and the threat to Jerusalem was eliminated.

At the time Isaiah gave the sign to Ahaz, the child born to the unnamed young woman might have been King Hezekiah, Isaiah’s son, or another child born soon after the oracle was proclaimed. But, the gospel of Matthew interprets the birth of the child Immanuel as a reference to the birth of Christ. This eschatological interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecy is based on the conviction of the early Christians that in Christ God is actually present with his people.

The name Immanuel means “God with us.” Whether God was with the people of Judah for judgment or for salvation is debatable. In the context of Isaiah’s promise to Ahaz, the prophecy of the child Immanuel was an assurance to the king that God would be present with his people to deliver them.

In the child Immanuel, God was present in the hopes and faith of the people. Although God's presence was spiritual, in the hearts of the people, it was nonetheless real.

The presence of Immanuel is the great hope that Advent brings to humanity. In the child of Bethlehem, God entered human history and was present with humanity: "and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14). In the child born in Bethlehem God made himself known to his people. This time, however, his presence was physical, which allowed people to know that, through the child of Bethlehem, God was reconciling the world unto himself.

The statement "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19) reflects the early church's faith that Isaiah's prophecy stating God would be present with his people had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. What God promised to Ahaz and the people of Judah became a reality with the birth of Christ. When Matthew identified Jesus with the child Immanuel, he was expressing the faith of Jesus' followers, the same faith Christians celebrate in the Advent season.

During Advent, Christians are called to radical faith. In the midst of all the uncertainties of life, when we are confronted with the paroxysms of war and violence, faith and trust in God is the anchor that holds our lives and helps us to stand firm and not fall. When life's situations seem hopeless and we are besieged from every side, we must remember that we are not alone, "for God is with us" (Isaiah 8:10).

CONCLUSION

The oracles of Isaiah were spoken a long time ago to a people who needed hope and encouragement. His oracles proclaimed the coming of God to redeem his people and to establish a peaceful kingdom. During Advent, Christians must reflect on the time when conflict among nations will cease, the peaceful kingdom a descendant of David will establish, the way we must walk daily, and the One who is God with us.

Isaiah's oracles spoke to the situation of God's people and described his vision for a future brought by God. Advent speaks to Christians about the present and the future. The presence of God in Christ is the reality that gives meaning to our present. The expectation of his coming prepares us for the day when the future Christ promised will become a reality.

Isaiah's message proclaims a future filled with hope. His message has deep implications for God's people today. The hope Isaiah proclaims points us to a sacred place, to a fallen tree, to a highway in the desert, and to the birth of a child. Isaiah's message directs our faith to a future in which justice will prevail, in which creation will be restored, and universal peace will be established. Advent heightens this hope and impels us to journey together with Immanuel on this Holy Way, a journey that will culminate with the establishment of God's kingdom.

NOTES

- 1 Drew Christiansen, SJ, "Liturgy and the Political Isaiah," *America* (December 3, 2007), 28.
- 2 Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 40.
- 3 Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 30.
- 4 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 171.
- 5 Alec J. Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 219.
- 6 David McKenna, *Isaiah 1-39* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 331.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 330.

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