



Grasp the Promises

Journeying through Advent
with the prophet Isaiah

Introduction

In this lectionary year (year A) during Advent, all the Old Testament readings are words of prophecy taken from the prophet Isaiah. This ancient prophet of God to the people of Judah lived and worked almost 3000 years ago. Yet his words have not merely been fulfilled but also *refilled* with meaning for us today in our situation in 2007.

Over these four Sundays of Advent, Pastor will preach a series of four sermons on these Isaiah readings, focussing on the theme of God's promises for our future. This booklet contains the four Isaiah readings together with some devotional thoughts and discussion questions. We encourage you to use this as a resource for your own preparation this Advent, and as something to help you engage with the preaching of God's Word over these next four weeks.

Isaiah's voice was first heard by a people in pain and struggling, a people who looked at the future with little hope. This is how so many are feeling today too. May Isaiah's voice speak to us now in this Advent period, bringing the message of hope and renewal in Jesus Christ to us all.

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

The Mountain of the Lord

- ¹ The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
- ² In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
- ³ Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
- ⁴ He shall judge between the nations,



and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!

Commentary

The “mountain of the Lord” is a common image in the Old Testament prophets and especially so in Isaiah. It depicts a time in the future—the day of the Lord—when God will return to Jerusalem, his holy hill, to establish His *righteous* kingdom, in contra-distinction to the corrupt and violent kingdoms of Judah’s earthly kings.

Unlike kings who seek greatness through military power, God’s kingdom will be one of peace, where the nations all come together under his reign. Isaiah is looking forward to the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ, who brings peace through his servant kingship.

The weapons of war transformed into implements for farm work is the reverse of what so often happened in ancient nations: in war time there was a shortage of weapons and farm tools were adapted for hand to hand combat.

Jesus’ peaceful kingdom has now been established. He reigns in the hearts of his people, from where he spreads his peace and the good news of eternal hope.

Reflect

- What might this reading say to us today in regard to military power as a means to peace?
- Where might we find “the mountain of the Lord” today? Where do we find his presence and instruction?
- How can Christians live in and live out this peaceful kingdom of God here in the world?

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

The Peaceful Kingdom

¹A shoot shall come out from the stock of
Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his
roots.

²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and
understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the
peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be
glorious.



Commentary

Here we zoom in on the means of God's peaceful kingdom coming into

the world. The defunct dynastic line of King David (pictured as a dead stump), which has been such a disaster, will put out a new and healthy branch. This new branch will be God's agent of renewal and life for his people, and for all humanity.

In fact this new righteous branch will carry God's own justice and be a source of healing and reconciliation for the whole of creation.

This branch is of course Jesus—born from the house and family of David. He is much more than a spokesman of prophet. He is the very goodness and justice of God in human form!

Reflect

- What characteristics of Jesus do you recognise from the description in verses 1-5?
- Why would this promised Messiah “not judge by what he sees”?
- What kind of world is described in verses 6-9? How is it different from the world we live in now?
- How can you see Jesus' influence changing things in our world today?

Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1–10

The Return of the Redeemed to Zion

¹ The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

- ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing
for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the
wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become
a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
- ⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
- ⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
- ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



Commentary

Isaiah's stunning images of the desert in bloom in this reading give us a visual taste of what God's renewing power in the world is doing. Jesus is restoring everything.

Isaiah is talking about the land of Judah not in literal terms, but poetically, as a desert—a place of spiritual deadness and poverty, where there is nothing for the people. Israel too are spiritually dead and lifeless—weak, blind, deaf and stunted, like plants trying to grow in the desert dry and heat.

And yet, out of this deadness (as out of Jesse's dead stump) comes new life—abundant and overflowing new life. This is a miracle—life from death!

Isaiah describes here the renewal of God's creation through the one who himself is life out of death, Jesus Christ. When we are called and welcomed by him, he begins his desert-transforming work in us. We are made alive by Jesus' streams of living waters, which revive and refresh us.

This image of a land in drought is very powerful for us today in our land. Maybe you have seen what effect it has on people when a long drought breaks and "waters flow in the desert". What effect does this have on people?

Reflect

- Have you ever experienced a spiritual drought in your life? How was it?
- What happens when such a drought breaks?
- What spiritual state is our land in at present, drought or plenty?
- What does this prophecy have to say to Australia?

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10–16

Isaiah Gives Ahaz the Sign of Immanuel

¹⁰ Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 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. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Commentary

The immediate historical background of this prophecy is often not understood. King Ahaz of Judah (son of Uzziah) is being given a sign by God to encourage him and strengthen his faith in the face of military attack by two neighbouring kings (Rezin and Pekah).

Through Isaiah, God gives Ahaz a sign of his favour and protection: a young woman (more accurately, a virgin) will conceive and bear a child. This figurative expression is sometimes used in prophetic speech as shorthand for a fixed period of nine months. Further to this period of nine months, Isaiah prophecies that before the child born to this woman is old enough to know right from wrong (is of school age) the lands of the two attacking kings will be laid waste.



God's favour and help will be so self-evident at that time that the woman will name her son "Immanuel" meaning "God is with us". Ahaz was given this sign in order for him to know that God was with him and find hope and confidence in his shaky situation.

Although this historical background explains the immediate sense of this prophecy, we know that the words of the prophets are not just fulfilled once, but "refilled" with meaning for later generations. The Gospel writers clearly see this prophecy as a reference to Mary and the birth of Jesus who is "God with us" in the fullest and a final sense.

This promise comes to us as it came to Ahaz, in the midst of troubled times, as a sign of hope for a future that to many looks less than positive. Jesus was and is and always will be "God with us".

Reflect

- What worries you about the future?
- Do you believe things will get better or worse?
- How were things at the time that Jesus was conceived and born – peaceful and settled?
- Immanuel means God is with us. How do you know God is with you?
- Have you ever experienced God speaking his Word of reassurance and promise to you in a difficult or painful time?
- Does the news of Christ's birth change your thoughts about the future?
- If Jesus is with us, what does this mean for our future and the world's future?