

**The Voice of the Prophets Proclaiming
Mid-Week Advent Service
December 9, 2015**

In the Dr. Seuss cartoon "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas", the Grinch hated the joy that came from Christmas. So what he did was steal all the presents, all the lights, all the trees--everything that he could steal that had to do with Christmas.

That's not what I would have done. If I wanted to attempt to steal Christmas from you, I would do exactly the opposite of what the Grinch did. Yes, exactly the opposite. Instead of stealing the presents and the lights and the trees and the cookies, I would make Christmas **all about** the presents and the lights and the trees and the cookies. I would constantly run TV ads making sure that you understood how critical a part of Christmas presents were. I would bombard you with radio commercials advertising various products--in order that you might pick the best gifts and have the most meaningful Christmas ever, of course! I would lead you to think that you yourself might be the Grinch if you were considering being one of the few houses on your street that wasn't ablaze in Christmas lights. I'd make it so people began talking about Christmas before Thanksgiving was over, and I'd make it so that you were constantly assailed by Christmas music whether you were in your car, at the mall, pumping gas, or at work.

I would focus you on Christmas so much that you wouldn't even have time to think, time to realize that I had stolen Christmas from you. For all the voices, all the clutter, and all the chaos would keep us from listening to the voices that really matter.

The believers of Israel didn't have all these things, all these voices. But they had the voices that mattered. They prepared for Christmas by listening to the "voices from the past." During this Advent service we are going to listen to some of those voices. They will remind us that good feelings, nice presents, enjoyable traditions and beautiful music are not the real heart of Christmas. The heart of Christmas is God's promise of a Savior and his fulfillment of that promise. This evening we'll listen to the voice of the prophets proclaiming

From out of the ancient past the voices of the prophets ring with God-inspired certainty, calling people to turn to the Lord with repentant faith, and offering God's abundant promises. Everything will surely come to pass, just as they foretold.

As far back as the Garden of Eden, God had promised to send a Savior. When Adam and Eve sinned, he promised to send someone to "crush the devil's head." But beyond that, God didn't go into detail. He didn't say how they would recognize this Savior, from where he would come, or exactly what he would do to crush the devil's power. But as we listen to the prophets, we gradually see more and more information being revealed.

In our first reading for tonight we see that the Savior would be descended from the family of Jesse, the father of King David. It was an amazing prophecy, considering that Jesse had been dead for many years. David also had been dead for many years. More than that, the power and influence of David's family had been dead for many years.

But leave it to God to create life where there was none. Leave it to God to make a Messiah come from what appeared to be a dead branch, that we who were ourselves dead in sin might also have life. Our first reading is from Isaiah 11:1-2:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

This is the word of the Lord. We continue with hymn 47, v. 1: "Behold a Branch Is Growing."

Although it was clear that the Messiah would “spring from Jesse’s race”, yet there was still a question of how exactly this promised Messiah was going to crush the devil’s head, a question of how he was going to save us. After all, what about our sins? What about the fact that God demands that we be found righteous, or sinless, before him? The prophet Jeremiah prophesies also about that branch from David’s line. He also makes reference to peace and safety through this Messiah. But he tells us more. For he calls him, “The Lord **OUR** Righteousness.”

What a key Old Testament passage! We are indeed going to be saved—but not through good things that we have done. No, the righteousness will not come from us, but from him. And yet that righteousness would be ours. We read Jeremiah 33, verses 14 through 16:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.”

This is the Word of the Lord. We continue with hymn 401, verses 1 and 5: “Your Works, Not Mine, O Christ.”

While Jeremiah tells us that this Savior was going to become our righteousness, Isaiah tells us exactly how this was going to happen: The Messiah would take our place. Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is it made more clear that the Messiah was going to be our substitute. “He” and “our” are repeatedly contrasted by Isaiah. The punishment which our sins deserved would be suffered by him. The wounds which we should have received were instead received by him—and yet we were the ones who were healed.

We note also that Isaiah makes a point of the full extent of the Messiah’s work. He would not come just to bear the sins of some, just to make payment for the sins of a few. No, rather “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us **all**.”

How reassuring it must have been for the Jews to see that Isaiah speaks of the Messiah’s work in such certain terms—as though it had already been completed! How much more reassuring it is for us read the gospels and to see that it has indeed been completed. We read Isaiah 53, verses 2 through 6:

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was punished for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

This is the Word of the Lord. We continue with hymn 127, verses 1 and 4, “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted.”

What sort of a Savior would this have to be? When God made his promise to Adam and Eve, he had indicated that this Savior would be “the woman’s offspring.” That is, he would be a human being.

And yet he would have to be more than that. He would have to be someone different than you and me. If he was going to actually become our righteousness, he would have to be born without the guilt of original sin. If he were actually going to make a satisfactory payment for the sin of the whole world, he could be no mere man, for the Psalms tell us that no man can redeem, or make a payment for, the life of another.

Had this Messiah been a mere man, the punishment of which Isaiah spoke in chapter 53 would never be enough to save us. But Isaiah also assures us that this Messiah, this Savior would be born of a virgin—born without the damning guilt of original sin. This child would be Immanuel—that is, “God with us”—and therefore he would be capable of making a payment for our sins.

Today people will mock the possibility of a virgin birth, protesting that the Messiah may have been a great person, he may have been a great teacher, he may even have suffered greatly on a cross, but that he was certainly conceived of 2 human parents, “just like the rest of us.” Don’t believe it. A Savior who is “just like the rest of us” is not a Savior. No, we needed God himself to be “with us.” Therefore we rejoice to hear the words of Isaiah 7, verse 14:

The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

This is the word of the Lord. We continue by singing hymn 36, verses 1 and 4: "A Great and Mighty Wonder."

Let there be no doubt about it. This child would be no ordinary child. If the name Immanuel weren’t evidence enough of that, the many other names which Isaiah gives to him prove it beyond all doubt. He is given names such as “Mighty God” and “Everlasting Father.” This Messiah would be God himself, come down to this dark earth, to a planet of people walking in darkness and doomed to eternal death, to save us.

The mind reels at the thought—God becoming one of us. It could be compared to a king volunteering to be a peasant, but it wouldn’t be enough. It could be compared to a human being volunteering to be a slug, but the comparison still wouldn’t be strong enough. There are no words, no comparisons which can describe such humility, such love.

But this humble descendant of David would establish a kingdom far greater than David’s kingdom. It would be a kingdom of justice and righteousness, and it would last forever. Clearly Isaiah is prophesying about the kingdom of heaven here.

And you and I will be subjects in that kingdom forever and ever. Because Isaiah says, “To **us** a child is born, to **us** a son is given.” There are a lot of splendid gifts that people give one another for Christmas, but your name and my name are not written on most of those gifts. Be assured that your name is written on the gift of God which contains a Savior. Be assured that you will live in that kingdom of justice and righteousness forever.

We read from Isaiah chapter 9, verses 2, 6, and 7: *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...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. 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.*

This is the Word of the Lord. We continue with hymn 90, verses 1-4: “The People that in Darkness Sat.”

Finally the prophet Micah tells us where to find this Messiah—in Bethlehem. He writes in chapter 5, verse 2, “*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*” In the final chapter of Micah, he said, “*But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.*” So Micah waited. So all believing Jews waited...until 700 years later some angels appeared to a group of shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem and said to them, “He’s here. The Savior is here.” The shepherds went to Bethlehem, and there, in that unlikely town, in that unlikely place all the prophecies met together. There in the manger was that branch of David, child of Mary, a descendant of David. There was that sinless son of a virgin, who had been conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. There was God with us. There was “a child, a son, the Prince of Peace...for me.” There was our Savior. We continue by singing hymn 54: “Where Shepherds Lately Knelt”