

Christmas Has Changed the World

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part Advent series

December 12, 2010

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Isaiah 61:1–4 (NRSV)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Luke 1:47–55 (NRSV)

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Advent is not only a time to look ahead and to prepare, it is also a time to look back and to rejoice. For Christmas has changed the world.

It seems to be human nature for people to believe that they live in the most challenging and most momentous times of all. I guess it invests our sense of ourselves with more significance. But the truth is that the climax of human history, the most momentous time of all time, occurred 2,000 years. The course of empires and kingdoms has marched forward since, but all walk in the shadow of a manger in Bethlehem.

Jesus Makes a Stunning Announcement

Last week we learned that John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, the one who would usher in the arrival of God's Kingdom. This week, our text is taken from Isaiah, a prophet who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, whose words were used by Jesus in making a stunning proclamation of his own.

In Luke's gospel, after his baptism and confrontation with Satan in the wilderness, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth to begin his public ministry. Luke (beginning at 4:14) tells us how Jesus went to his synagogue and rose to read from the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus unrolled the scroll to today's passage from Isaiah. Jesus read portions of this passage and announced that these words had been fulfilled!

In doing so, Jesus announced that he was the anointed one¹, the Messiah promised long before, the one who would inaugurate God's kingdom. Jesus went on to imply that even Gentiles would be welcome in God's kingdom, as had been promised to Abraham two millennia before. Little wonder that Jesus was chased out of town – after all, who did this hometown boy think he was. But why did Jesus choose this passage? What does it mean for

Isaiah and the Kingdom of God

In the Lectionary (the three-year schedule of suggested Scripture readings), each Sunday has a reading from the OT, from a Psalm, from a Gospel, and from a NT epistle. Thus, for the four weeks of Advent there are twelve OT readings over the three years – and seven of them are from Isaiah!! Let's look at why.

Isaiah consists of two portions. So-called "First Isaiah," chapters 1-39, was written more than 700 years before Jesus, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians. Portions of "First Isaiah" look ahead to a time when all of God's people would be restored under God's rule. In other words, the prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the coming of God's kingdom, when all things would be put right.

So-called "Second Isaiah," chapters 40-66, was written during the time of the Babylonian exile, about 500 years before Jesus. In the midst of the Jews' crushing pain and despair, this prophet brought them comforting promises of a time when God would raise up a Savior who would usher in God's rule. And in God's kingdom, there would be no blind, no deaf, no lame, no poor – no tears.

It is an expression of God's love that the most hopeful images of God's kingdom were written during the time of Israel's deepest darkness.

us?

God's Kingdom Come

Many centuries before Jesus, when God had first formed his people, he had made a covenant with them -- he would be their God and they would be his people (Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 30:22). God promised them the restoration and renewal of all creation in the kingdom of God. He promised them a savior, a Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom. Indeed, still today, each week when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God's kingdom will come, on earth as it is in heaven. Today's passage from Isaiah is one of many Old Testament word-pictures that try to help us see what God's kingdom is like.

In God's kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God's kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God's kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God's kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to

¹ Anointing was a means of investing someone or something with power. The kings of Israel were anointed. Sometimes prophets were anointed. Even buildings or pillars could be anointed. 1 Samuel 24:6 refers to kings as the "anointed ones," which came to be the Hebrew word *mashiah*, or "Messiah." *Mashiah* was translated into Greek as *christos*. To call Jesus "Christ" is to call him the Messiah, the anointed one of God. So, you can see the significance of Jesus' claim that this passage from Isaiah, with its reference to "anointed," had been fulfilled!

demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God's kingdom is a present reality, though not yet in all its fullness.

The Magnificat

Mary's song in verses 46 to 55 of Luke's first chapter is often referred to as the Magnificat, after the first word in the early Latin translation of the Bible (the "Vulgate"¹).

In the Vulgate, the opening of the song is "'Magnificat anima mea, Dominum", or, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." As you can see, the NRSV preserves the word "magnify" in its translation of the couplet that opens the song. Other translations use words like "proclaims . . . exalts . . . praises . . . glorifies." Mary knows that this birth and the keeping of all God's promises that it embodies is truly magnificent!

Over the centuries, Mary's Magnificat has been set to music by many, but certainly the most well-known piece is Johann Sebastian Bach's choral masterpiece, the *Magnificat*. One of the few times that he used a Latin text, Bach's *Magnificat* debuted on Christmas Day, 1723, at the Church of St. Nicholas (really!) in Leipzig, Germany.

1. In about 400 AD, a Christian Bishop, Jerome, translated portions of the Bible into Latin. His work and that of others developed into the standard Latin version of the Bible, known as the Vulgate. This Latin Bible was the dominant Bible for centuries. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church designated the Vulgate as their only official Bible. It may surprise you to learn that it was called the Vulgate because in 400AD Latin was the common or "vulgar" language!

A New Day

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed of God. When Jesus rose in the synagogue to read from Isaiah, he wasn't simply making some interesting theological point, he was proclaiming that a new day had dawned. For the rest of his earthly life, Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world.

Christmas *has* changed the world. Look again at Mary's song from Luke 1. "He *has* shown strength with his arm; he *has* scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He *has* brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he *has* filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He *has* helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

When Mary sings of the pending birth of her baby, she sings in the past tense of all that it means. In a deep and true sense, once even the announcement of Jesus' birth is made, it is done; God's promises have been kept. It is as if God is speaking salvation into existence. Of course, much lay ahead – birth, life, death, and resurrection.

Christmas *has* changed the world. The entire world and all the people in it live in the light of Christmas. Far too many turn their eyes away from the light and even war against the light, but that doesn't change the truth of Christmas, the truth for which we prepare ourselves in Advent.

We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week. But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. Jesus is Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23), meaning "God-with-us." The Holy Spirit is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26), the empowering presence of God in our lives.

The new day ushered in by Christmas is to be a day of comfort and peace and joy. It is a little ironic that the stress of the holiday season can make it so hard for us to embrace the peace of God's kingdom. We ought to catch our collective breath and see the reality of God's kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children's faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, in the personal relationships that we cherish, and in all the goodness of this life. Christmas *has* changed the world . . . now it is our job to make it a living reality for all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God more than he spoke of anything else. Many of his actions were aimed at demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom. As Christians we proclaim that Jesus ushered in God's kingdom. Still . . . we all know that the world is a mess, filled with tragedy and suffering, as well as peace and joy. So what we really proclaim is that God's kingdom is here already/not yet. In other words, God's kingdom is here and real in some sense, to some extent, but not in all its fullness. We still await the arrival of God's kingdom in all its glory. How can we make sense of this? How can we make God's kingdom real for us? If it is here, then how can we see it?

2. When we pray that God's kingdom will come, God's will be done, we are praying for the marriage of heaven and earth. This Christmas season, what can we do to make this marriage more of a reality?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Luke 4:14-30 Jesus goes to his hometown.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Isaiah 58:6-11 Jesus also read from this passage in Nazareth.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Micah 4:1-7 A word-picture of God's kingdom.</p>	<p>Thursday, Zephaniah 3:14-20 God's promise of a new day.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 God makes a covenant with David – a covenant fulfilled in Jesus.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in Festival Hall

Christmas at the Movies!

We are looking at favorite Christmas movies through the lens of Scripture.

Dec 12 – Miracle on 34th St.

Dec 19 – The Nativity Story (2006)

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Coming in January

Scott's 11:00 Sunday class

*Good News for Anxious Christians:
Ten practical things you don't have to do*

Scott's Monday Evening Bible Academy Class starting Jan. 24

Did Paul Really Hate Women?

Tuesday Lunchtime Class (beginning Jan. 18)

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future