

The Spirit and the King

We have just gone through another contentious national election when opposing candidates have heaped blame



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and accusations on one another, staggering amounts of money have been spent, and nothing positive has resulted yet. Democracy is messy! In the history of the world the enticement of power has created wars, fostered injustice and resulted in pain for generations.

Our text is timely, as we focus on Isaiah's words of hope that portray the ultimate sovereign who embodies the deepest longings of the human heart. As in the earliest days of the Christian church we see in this text the promise of Jesus coming: "A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from its roots" (v. 1). Isaiah is calling Judah back to the Davidic dynasty with the promise of godly leadership and prosperity, as in the days of David and Solomon. But the language of this text describes a leader empowered by God's Spirit who will be much more than a national leader and will usher in a new age of righteousness and spiritual justice.

Most likely, this passage is set during the reign of King Ahaz of Judah (735-715 BC). Isaiah 7-11 fits well into the context of the Syro-Ephraimitic War (734-732 BC). Isaiah 7:1-17 records the well-known "Immanuel" sign God gave to Judah's king. In that war, King Rezin of Syria and King Pekah of Israel attempted to stop Syria, led by Tiglath-Pileser III. King Ahaz of Judah refused to join the alliance. You can see that after Solomon's death Israel not only divided, but moral and political disaster ensued.

A cursory glance at this text alerts us to the idea this is much more than a promise that the next king of Judah will be wiser and more powerful than David. A "branch" from the "stump of Jesse" (David's father) offers the image of a tree that has been cut down but is sending out new growth. But the following kings – Hezekiah, Josiah and Zerubbabel – were all seriously flawed. God's Spirit resting on this new king does not fit any of these descendants of David. They are decidedly not the "branch."

This lesson series has told us about God's Spirit "resting" on the elders of Israel (Numbers 11:25), on the prophet Azariah (2 Chronicles 15:1), and points us to various Old Testament appearances of God's Spirit. But this outpouring of the Spirit on a descendant of David presents a holiness not found in any other character in the Bible – except Jesus.

We are accustomed to lavish descriptions of some people God has anointed to serve him, but listed here (vv. 2-3) are three pairs of virtues that describe the ultimate man of God: 1) wisdom and understanding; 2) counsel and power; 3) knowledge and fear (godliness). These same six traits are used to describe Wisdom in Proverbs 8:12-15. As early as the fourth century AD, baptism included a prayer that the candidate would be blessed with these six qualities in their spiritual life.

We can choose to interpret these prophetic words as positive encouragement in disastrous past history, or we can join the first century church in recognizing them as the promise of Messiah, who is not only a descendant of David but so much more. We do know that God's kingdom is not a worldly political structure and this dramatic promise voiced by Isaiah comes at a time when the nation of Israel will never rise to a pinnacle of worldly or spiritual perfection. The ultimate plan of God's redeeming grace is progressing beyond human knowledge and effort.

God's Spirit will be in this new "king," giving him a spirit of wisdom and understanding. Isaiah 11:3 describes this coming king: "He will delight in fearing the Lord. He won't judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay." The world's ideas of greatness, power and wealth will be brushed aside by the standards of God's love and truth. Isaiah was speaking the plain truth as he considered the history of spiritual indifference and moral laxity of those who claimed to be God's chosen. Their hope was not in clever political alliances or larger military budgets, but in the God who loved them through every disaster.

Like ancient Israel we stumble into the foolish notion that we are masters

Formations

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Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9

of this world. We can protect ourselves! We are god! Isaiah knew this fatal flaw well. When we play God, create our own rules and set up our own kingdoms, the results are tragic. Was Judah unable to look at their past and recognize that they were repeating the same foolish patterns? Are we doing the same thing?

Isaiah tells us this selfish destructive pattern must stop, but we cannot make the necessary changes on our own. God's Messiah, the answer to our deepest needs, is described: "Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist" (v. 5).

God will intervene, but will we face the truth in that day? Isaiah paints a beautiful symbolic scene of a world where the wolf will live with the lamb in harmony, the leopard will lie down with the young goat, the calf and lion will feed together, all creatures will live in harmony and a child will play over the serpent's den. I have an English transfer plate from 1820-40, titled "Millennium," that pictures this Isaiah passage. It expresses the longing during the early days of our country for the peace that can only be known when we truly love and serve God. We claim to be a Christian nation, but our values, morals, treatment of the poor and ill, racism and exclusion of God from our daily lives shows we are little different from those who first heard Isaiah's prophetic words of hope.

As God's people we must be different as we show those around us how to live by the example of Jesus. Isaiah understood that no earthly king, president or prime minister can lead our world to spiritual renewal. But the people of God, loving and serving God, and praying in the power of God's Spirit can be instruments for change and hope. Listen again to Isaiah's words of hope and be the presence of Christ wherever you go.

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