

December 3, 2017 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, Lessons & Carols  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Isaiah 11:1-6; 35:4-8; 7:13-14; John 1:1-4

### **In These Last Days**

The New Testament book of Hebrews begins, “Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets.” Not long ago we heard some of the various ways God spoke. In this service of Lessons and Carols, we heard three readings by three different people from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was one of the prophets through whom God spoke, or maybe more than one—it’s called the book of Isaiah, but there may have been three Isaiahs, that’s what Biblical scholars say, at least three Isaiahs, maybe more, for Isaiah is a long book; it covers a long period of time, almost three different centuries. And not just different centuries, different settings, perhaps three distinct geographical circumstances in the history of Israel. Hear now a bit more about the context of Isaiah—the contexts of Isaiahs, three different contexts—and see if you hear, too, how they might speak to our own.

There is the prophet Isaiah who speaks to Israel’s waning days as a regional power, speaks to the retreating memory of monarchial glory, kings who unified the country or built the Temple, rulers. But those days, days of the reigns of David and Solomon—who were far from perfect but who presided over what is remembered as a golden era—those days are long gone. The prophet Isaiah speaks to the time of kings who followed after, rulers who have been problematic at best and often much worse. Amidst corrupt leadership and widespread unrest the country has been split, rent into two parts that violently attack one another. Do we know this context? This kingdom is divided. The divide is great, and the future looks dim, and there are serious, ominous threats from abroad, and old and ongoing wars in the Middle East and its environs. This Isaiah speaks to us.

There is also, in Isaiah, the context of people who have been conquered and carted off. There is also the prophet Isaiah who speaks to a people in exile. This too, happened in Israel’s history, when the collapsing nation was taken over by the Babylonian empire and residents of Jerusalem were forcibly moved, relocated to a foreign land. They were told to live in a place completely unfamiliar among people they can’t fathom. We may think of people moved by natural disaster, hurricanes, or of people moved by personal disaster: the diagnosis, the job loss. We may know them, we may be them. The prophet Isaiah speaks to these people, to people who feel—who are—absolutely defeated. Isaiah speaks to people who no longer recognize the place they live, who are distanced from what they once held dear. Isaiah speaks to people far from home, who wonder if they will ever be able to go back home, if home will still be there if they can go back, if you can ever truly go back home. Or is that an impossibility, and not just geographically so? This Isaiah speaks to us.

There is also in Isaiah the context of people who have been gone for a long time, but who have returned. This too, happened in Israel’s history, after the Babylonian exile there was a return to Jerusalem. People returned to a place they thought they’d never see again, and what they saw wasn’t what they remembered. But were they accurate recollections, or had time and nostalgia reconfigured their memories, even created them? We may recognize this situation, too. The mind sometimes makes a memory of a happy time before that may not have been real. What is real, though, are the ruins that surround them now. The returnees live among rubble. Isaiah speaks to these people, to people who live among ruins, including the ruins of what has been most sacred to them. Their communal institutions, their holiest spaces and places are crumbling,

half-empty. Do we know this context? They are home, but home is hard, harsh, and there seems no end to the work that must be done. This Isaiah speaks to us.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors, and to us, by the prophets, in many and various contexts of disillusionment, desolation, and defeat. God spoke of the defeat of violence and division. God spoke of returning home to our true home. God spoke of communities rebuilt, of the sacred rediscovered, of life and lives made whole, and holy. God spoke of a shoot that would come out of the stump of Jesse; of the wolf living with the lamb; of waters breaking forth in the wilderness; of a Holy Way, on which not even fools will go astray; of a young woman would bear a son, and name him Immanuel.

Christians hear these words and hear Advent prophecies, promises, hear predictions, hints, signs of something coming—that is what Advent means—arrival, something coming. In the Christian church year, Advent is the season that comes before Christmas, the four weeks leading up to it, the time of listening and looking for what is coming.

Long ago, in many and various sways, God spoke by the prophets. And then God spoke another word. It was a singular word, a new word—and yet it was also there in the beginning, long ago. Before there was anything else, this Word was there, in the beginning, with God, and the Word was God.

These are the first words of the gospel of John. I spoke them, not long ago, there in your midst, just as the gospel is God speaking in our midst, just as John's one describes the Word coming into our midst: "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." Jesus is the Word, the Word of God, the Word made Flesh. The word "Word" is another way to name the one who is the Christ, a way to talk about the Christ before and beyond the flesh and blood person that he was. Or to put it another way, these verses are our Advent context and promise: there is darkness, all around, but a light shines through it, which is not overcome. A new day has dawned. Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways, by the prophets, but now in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.