

Sermon for Sunday, December 18, 2011
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Longing for the Day of Peace
Isaiah 11:1-9

11:1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 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 — 3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; 4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. 5 Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. 6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling [fatted calf?] together; and a little child will lead them. 7 The cow will feed [graze] with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's [snake's] nest. 9 They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

1. The setting: God offers hope in distress (Isaiah 7-10)

People long for good, noble leaders, for kings and heroes that deserve our loyalty. You may think I'm silly, but I think it's a factor in the agony many feel over Albert Pujols' decision to leave St. Louis and play baseball in Los Angeles. He's a great player *and* good man and we yearn for people who are great *and* good.

I'm a Cardinals fan, but I don't fault Pujols for taking \$254 million to play for the Angels. I don't blame the Angels for offering \$254 million. I don't blame the Cards for not offering the same amount, given his age and our market. But the angst of many Cardinal fans suggests there is more here than baseball. We see it when people ask "How could he do this *to us*? How could he *betray* us?" But baseball players are pro athletes. People change jobs, athletes can too. That isn't betrayal. In fact, athletes *can't* betray us because betrayal requires a relationship. No offense intended, but if private people (not e.g. presidents) don't know each other, betrayal is impossible.

A small point: We should care more about *real* relationships. We should get to know our neighbors and care for them, not distant pros. Better yet, we should get some exercise – it's good for our health. We should play on a team, if we can. Generally, pour our enthusiasm into people we know. That would be better.

Why then do we care so much and suffer so over *sports* heroes, who are strangers? Because we're looking for heroes. We live vicariously through champions. So we turn to Pujols, who is a great player, and more. He started a charitable foundation when he was twenty-five years old! He seems to give away most of his money to charitable organizations. But now he's moving away.

We're dismayed because we're searching for the perfect leader and didn't find him. We're hungry for heroic leaders. No mere man or woman will ever satisfy that hunger leader. But Isaiah speaks to that hunger and he predicts the coming of a king who will lead his people faithfully.

The story, which runs from Isaiah 6-11, begins with a failure. When God called Isaiah in Isa. 6, he told him the people of Judah wouldn't listen to him. We meet the prime example, king Ahaz, in Isaiah 7. Ahaz faces division and decline inside, warfare outside. The power of the day, Assyria has turned its army south, toward Israel and her neighbors. Will they fight or submit? Northern Israel and Aram decide to resist – and demand that Judah join them. Ahaz refuses and the Israelites, Arameans and Edomites attack him. He's in a bad position. He will have to fight someone – either his neighbors or the distant power, Assyria. The prophet Isaiah came to Ahaz in that dark hour. He promised: God will deliver you, if you but ask.

Ahaz refused. He wanted no part of Isaiah's faith. He wanted something new, a religion that fit the times. He worshipped the gods of the stars, of fertility. That fits the Assyrian religion, and fit his desire for an alliance with Assyria.

Ahaz preferred the help of pagans. So the Lord said, "Have it your way. The Assyrians will 'help' you, then make you vassals and plunder the land. Because he rejected God's help, Ahaz will see "distress, darkness and fearful gloom" (8:18-22).

2. The center: The hope for a perfect leader, a righteous king

So there is no grace for Ahaz, because he didn't want it. Yet in the next sentence, God offers grace to *Israel*: "There will be *no more gloom* for those who were in distress" 9:1. When the line of kings like Ahaz finally fails, the Lord will send a true king - wise, righteous, full of the Spirit and power. That's the leader we seek.

Isaiah 10 concludes with the image of a forest, cut down. Like that forest, the Lord will cut down evildoers, even evil Israelites. Judah is like a fallen forest. But life remains in the root. A great and righteous king will come from it.

11:1 Lit: There shall come forth **a shoot** from the stump of Jesse.
A new branch from his roots shall grow/bear fruit. He is shoot and root!

A ruler like David

All of Israel's kings are compared to David, but David is the one king who is called "the son of Jesse." Thus Isaiah declares that another David will come. More: this king who *grows from the root* of the fallen tree *is himself the root* of Jesse. So he comes from Jesse, but is also the *root or source* of Jesse. Who can this be? Only one, the Messiah. Jesus is from the line of David and also the source of David. Jesus is the root and shoot of David.

The Messiah will be a king like David. Fearless in battle, in the defense of his people. Yet also a poet, the man after God's heart. He wrote seventy psalms of worship. He is the shepherd of Israel. Yet he sang "*The Lord is my shepherd*" (2 Sam 5.2, Ps 23).

Who is this man? David strode into battle again and again, when Philistines, Syrians and Ammonites attacked his people. Yet he loved his men and cared for them. One day, when he was almost thirty years old, David was in southern Israel, near Bethlehem, his home town. He was battling Philistines who had captured his city. He lamented the loss and mused aloud. "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!" He longed for the sweet water of home. More, he wanted to see his nation strong again, so he could go home in peace.

Three of David's loyal men forgot he was a poet and took the request literally. They left camp, slipped into the city, passed the Philistine guards, drew water from the well, and carried it back to David, "Here is the water you craved."

What an awesome yet terrible gift, purchased at the risk of their lives! What should David do? Savor the water as a trophy of their love? No, they made a foolish sacrifice for a mere wish. David knew what he had to do: He poured the water onto the ground. Imagine their dismay. But he wanted them to know. It is good to sacrifice with David for the sake of Israel, but not to sacrifice for David as a mere man. They could fight together, with David as their leader. But no man deserved such loyalty. Such loyalty belongs to God alone – to Jesus.

Jesus is the perfect hero, a king like David but better. He is the Son of David – and David's Lord. Isaiah describes this most noble king for us. He is like David in courage, strength and love of God. But he is like Solomon in his wisdom. "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding... He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears" (11:2-3). Wisdom is the ability to navigate life. Understanding is the ability to perceive the truth.

He also has "the Spirit of counsel and of power." That means he has the ability to devise the right course of action and also has the strength, the prowess to carry out those plans. That's a leader! Even mighty king David confessed "though I am the anointed king, I am weak." His commanders, Joab and Abner, were "too strong" for him (2 Sam 3:39). All human leaders are constrained by forces outside their control. But Jesus carries out all his plans.

This great leader has "the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (11:2). He delights in the fear of God (11.3). Knowledge of God shows itself visibly. If we know God it changes us.

Suppose a man is a good husband. He's a great conversationalist. He says "I love you," clears the table, puts children to bed. But he never gives proper gifts at Christmas or birthday. His wife says, "It hurts me when I work hard to give you nice gifts and you grab whatever you see at the last moment." She tells him sweetly for years, but he never improves. Does he know he's grieving his wife? He will say "yes" but if he doesn't act on it, he doesn't really know.

Real knowledge of God changes us. Proverbs 3:7 says, "Do not be wise in your own eyes, fear the LORD and shun evil." If we fear the Lord, we shun evil. But – this is vital – no human *perfectly* shuns evil. We all have weaknesses. Jesus is the *one* righteous King, filled with the knowledge of God. (11:3-4) Jesus is a great king, full of wisdom and, Isaiah adds, the perfect judge. He's never deceived, since he never judges by appearances – what he sees or hears. He can always go to the heart of the matter. Therefore "he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor." Not that he favors the poor because they are poor. But no human impresses him, so he gives full attention to the cause of the poor. He is free to decide for the poor and vindicate them. So the King will bring righteousness to the earth.

Isaiah says, "the breath of his lips" will slay the wicked. His word is the instrument of judgment. Revelation says, "Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword." This week the great atheist Christopher Hitchens died. He was a brilliant political writer, never afraid to take a stand. His many readers grieve his loss. He was also a proud atheist, a blasphemer. How does Jesus judge such a man? With a word: "I heard what you said. But here I am. You said you wanted no part of me - and so it shall be, forever."

Isaiah 11:5 says this king is righteous. "Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist." Notice: It does not say, "His followers are righteous" it says *he* is righteous. Remember, God offered his grace to Ahaz, a king who murdered his own family member and led Israel into idolatry. But Israel never had a wholly righteous king. Lay the evil kings aside. Israel's *best kings*, David and Solomon, clearly failed. They indulged their appetites and misused their power. Other *good* kings claimed rights that were not theirs, joined foolish alliances and pointless wars.

But with Jesus, "Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist" (11:5). He is *clothed in righteousness* which means he is righteous to the core, truly good. We need to connect this to the gospel.

The common religious concept says good people amass a record of good deeds. God recognizes the achievement and favors the good in this life. He reincarnates us as a lovely human, not a loathsome insect. Or he grants eternal life.

The gospel says *Jesus* is righteous, faithful and merciful. He amassed a record of good deeds all through his life – a perfect record. If we ask, he gives his perfect record, his righteousness, to us.

The Harry Potter novels address this. In book 3 or 5, Dumbledore says, "Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those *who ask for it*." That could be a hint of the gospel. But in the last book and movie, he tells Harry that he must amend his saying: "Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who *deserve* it." It is a fine moment dramatically and good for the plot. But it's not a gospel moment. The gospel says, God helps all who ask truly, even though they do not deserve it. Isaiah says King Jesus is righteous and faithful. No one else! Grace is the rule.

Next Isaiah describes the reign of King Jesus. He will transform the world. Strife will cease. Because animals were so important in that day, he begins there.

3. The result of the leader's reign: God's peace fills the earth (Isa 11:6-9)

Isaiah 11:6 begins a poem about peace in the animal kingdom. The theme is predator and prey will live together. It begins, "the wolf will live with the lamb." Loose translation – the wolf and lamb will hang out a while. The lamb invites the wolf to stay. More, "the leopard will lie down [take a nap] with the goat. The lion and the yearling [fatted calf] together. Lions no longer see calves as tasty morsels.

Mankind oversees this new order with ease. We no longer fear the animals. Children need no competence or training. A toddler will be safe with them, and "lead them." More, an infant will play safely, sticking her hand into the den on a venomous snake in a little game – as when a little child holds and hugs and generally irritates the complacent family pet (11:8).

Next in Isaiah 11:7 the predator and prey will eat and sleep together. The bear will not feed on the cow, it will feed with the cow. Peace will prevail, all the way down, and strife will end. The world order will change: "The lion will eat straw like the ox."

The level of detail suggests that this is not mere symbolism. A new order, a new creation, will come. The old will pass away; Jesus will make all things new.

The crown of the new order is the end of sin. We love the vision of peace in the kingdom of four-legged animals, but we long even more for peace among two-legged humans who bear the image of God:

"They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD" (Isa 11:9). This is the knowledge that sinks in and brings change.

Isaiah 32 describes a transformation that reaches all the King's people:

A king will reign in righteousness // And princes will rule with justice.
Each man will be a shelter from the wind// and a refuge from the storm
Like streams of water in desert // Shadow of great rock in thirsty land

Note: Because King Jesus reigns in righteousness, his princes rule with justice. Princes are the leaders who follow Jesus closely. We expect them to follow him, by ruling with justice. The poor and needy get a fair deal, as we saw.

Then we read something new. In this age, there is a shortage of loving, caring people, folks whose home or office is always open. These few find a bed for wanderers, a plate for the hungry, an ear for the grieving. We know who they are and there never are enough of them. But in the new age, each man and woman will offer shelter. Every leader will lead well. Everyone would be ready and willing to offer protection – but it's not necessary.

In that day every eye will see, every ear will listen, every tongue will speak freely and well. Everyone will have the right values: "No longer will a fool be called noble, nor the scoundrel highly respected" (32:5). How we adore scoundrels and fools! How good it will be when we stop admiring people for all the wrong reasons.

We can taste that now and I hope you do. I hope that all of you who rule, manage, direct, and lead strive to do so with justice. I hope each of us knows that we can shelter the wounded. We can give a bed, a chair and a meal. We can be a friend to the lonely, a refuge for the frightened.

But we long for the day when there will be no harm. Then no one will need refuge or shelter. What a day that will be! We will not ignore, marginalize or minimize. No more preening and posturing. No more putdowns. We will never demean or dismiss. We will not idolize one and vilify another. Nor will we idolize and vilify the same person.

No more hating. No more ascribing bad motives. No more false accusations. No gossip and slander. No more saying one thing to the face and the opposite behind their back. No more scheming or gloating. Isaiah 11:10 continue, "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious."

4. The hunger for more

Do you long for that day? It's right that we do. We have tiny tastes of it and that taste teaches us to long for more. C. S. Lewis calls these moments "news from a country we have never yet visited... the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard." He says this hunger for beauty, this memory of our own past offers "images of what we really desire." You know what he means.

I remember reading books to my children ages eight, six and two. In our humble home with baby on lap, the older ones snuggling as close as could be on either side as I read story after story. I never want this to end. Stay up late tonight! Stay young forever! We don't mean it, of course, but it is a taste of eternal joy. When our children are little, they fit into our side, we walk side by side, hand in hand, hearts

united. But they grow up.

Or we climb to a mountain lake in the Rockies. The skies so blue, the air so crisp, the joy in the conquest of height and thin air. We want to stay forever, with our companions. But our water is low, our stomach growls, the temperature drops, clouds glower and we must flee. Or the quiet pleasures of a week at the beach with books and time as family.

How swiftly those summery days pass.
 Until time demands a wistful good-bye
 to that home-like house and the good world 'round it.
 Children and parents, almost in tears, all happy and sad,
 Praying that next summer will come, and soon.

But let's not focus on leisure. Some days at work offer a taste of perfect life. Everything flows as it should. We finish a day's labor by 11:00. Someone walks in, *just as we finish*, asking for help, help, facts and skills, we're primed to give.

And there is time at work with friends. A conversation over a meal. Visions and passions coincide, interests overlap, yet we bring separate skills and insights and positions. The clock is ticking. Stop, stop time, we think. We want to blow up our schedules and go deeper and deeper, running down our ideas, testing them, refining them, creating a plan to implement them.

For this we long. In Lord of the Rings, after Frodo and his friends have completed their terrible quest, they settle for a while. But Frodo knows he will never fully recover from his wounds. He must leave them; this life must end. Frodo parted with his friends and boarded a ship. The sails went up "and the wind blew, and slowly the ship slipped away... into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that the grey rain-curtain [of this life] turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise."

This is the land we seek. It is the land with no tears, no darkness or death, no sin or sorrow. But more, it is the land of Jesus, the king of virtue, wisdom and peace. The king with power to heal all our sins and diseases. Two questions:

Do you long for this? Or are you, like today's atheists, content with the thin desire to embrace this life and pass to oblivion? Are you a new Ahaz, pursuing your own religion and deliverance? Or do you long for this, the land of good King Jesus. You've glimpsed its beauty, caught its scent, sung its song now and again.

Do you know this good king? Not in the flesh – not yet. But you have heard his story. Today we focus on the beginning - his birth, an incarnation. God in the flesh, to redeem our flesh. By faith, by declaring our loyalty to him, we can have the first taste of his healing work. It's good to know his unconditional love. Good to extend to others the grace he extended to you.

Let's learn from the error of Ahaz. Take the offered grace. Accept the help and love of the good King. Taste some of his fruit now. And long for him and the healing that comes when the king fully restores his realm in righteousness and peace.