

11/29/20 – The Light of Advent – Isaiah 4, 6

A single candle is a wonderful picture for the celebration of Advent. And what I want you to do is imagine this single light – against a sea of total darkness. Picture just this small flame, as if all the other lights were turned out. As if we could block out all the light coming in through the windows. Picture just one small light set against a vast darkness.

Because that's a picture of Advent. A single light breaking through a sea of darkness. And for four Sundays, beginning today, we are going to celebrate the light that has broken through the darkness.

The dictionary definition of the word "advent" is the arrival of a notable person, thing or event. Now for Christians, the word has a particular significance. Because we celebrate the arrival of the most notable person ever to set foot on the earth. We celebrate the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the flesh. The First Advent was about 2000 years ago, the incarnation of Jesus. The Second Advent still lies in the future. The Second Advent is the return of Jesus Christ as King. He will return to judge every soul and to establish the new heavens and the new earth. So in terms of the big picture of all history we can talk about 2 Advents. The first coming of Christ has taken place and we await the second coming.

We can also narrow our focus and look at the small picture. We can look at just this year, just the weeks ahead. And that's how we're looking at it when we say we're going to celebrate four Sundays of Advent leading up to Christmas. So next week you may hear me say something about the "second Sunday of Advent". That doesn't mean Jesus has returned. In the small picture, we count four *Sundays of Advent* leading up to Christmas. Big picture, there are two Advents and the second is an awesome and glorious day that lies yet in the future. Really we celebrate both Advents each Sunday all year long. We just make a special emphasis for four weeks beginning today.

So with that in mind, today we are going to be looking at 2 passages in Isaiah that were written long before the first Advent. They were written hundreds of years before the Lord Jesus came down from heaven and took on flesh. These passages in Isaiah point forward in time to the future coming of Jesus. Now, the passages we'll look at today are not those we typically think of as classic "Christmas" Bible passages. We have those in Isaiah and we'll see some next week. But I chose to start with less familiar passages. Or at least those less commonly associated with Christmas. I wanted to do that because I want us to start off the season remembering that **the light of Advent shines all throughout the Bible**. Yes, it shines through very clearly in passages that speak of a virgin who will bear a child. And Scriptures that tell of a baby born in a manger. And we'll get a good look at those in the coming weeks, I promise. But I think a great place to start is with a passage where the light of Advent shines through clearly, but perhaps unexpectedly. And that's what we find in Isaiah chapter 4, beginning in verse 2.

Isaiah 4:2-6

In that day, the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth will be the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel. It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy – everyone who

is recorded for life in Jerusalem. When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy. There will be a shelter to give shade from the heat by day, and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain.

“In that day” We heard those words at the beginning of those verses. “In that day, the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious.”

Now if I were reading a different passage in Isaiah and you heard me mention a “child who will be born” You might feel a little burst of excitement, right! Jesus is coming! Advent! And if I read another passage in Isaiah about a “suffering servant,” you might have the same kind of reaction. It’s a picture of Jesus! The promised Messiah! And what I hope is that you get the same kind of feeling when you hear about this particular *Branch*.

The branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth will be the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel.

Like a branch from a great tree, Jesus the Son springs forth from God the Father. Yet, also like a branch, Jesus’ visible beginnings are unimpressive. Think about this, how often do you stop and really take a close look at a small branch just beginning to sprout from the trunk of a tree. For most of us, not that often. Because a little branch just beginning to sprout isn’t really that impressive. It’s usually going to go unnoticed.

Now our Branch in Isaiah 4:1 *will be* beautiful and glorious. And through the growth and the eventual fullness of this branch, we are told, the fruit of the earth will be made a great blessing. The bounty of the earth, the barrels of apples and peaches, the truckloads of tomatoes and carrots, the wheat for the bread and the fish and the meat...all of this blessing will be available to satisfy hungry bellies, yes, but this food will also satisfy the deepest hunger of souls. Because just as this Branch is more than a branch, so too the fruit of the earth here is more than just another year’s harvest from the garden. This is blessing and food for the souls of God’s faithful people. All the best of what creation has to offer mankind springs forth in this picture, for joy and blessing.

As it says here, **the fruit of the earth will be the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel.**

God’s chosen faithful will enjoy the great blessing. God’s chosen faithful in this passage are the survivors of Israel. These are promised a blessing of great bounty.

And isn’t it interesting that it says the *survivors* of Israel. And more than just interesting, it’s a little unsettling. Because if we’re talking about *survivors* of Israel, that must mean there were people who didn’t survive. So some were blessed by this Branch and were blessed with the enjoyment of the fruit of the earth, but some were not.

And this brings us back to the picture that we started with. A single light shining against a sea of darkness. Or a single, small branch sprouting from a tree in the middle of a vast desert.

To fully appreciate the beauty of the flame, we have to see it against the dark backdrop. To fully appreciate the branch, we have to see it in contrast to the desolate landscape all around it.

To see the First Advent, to see the incarnation, in its full power and glory, we have to see it shining forth against the bleak backdrop of a world lost in sin. A well known carol reminds us of this. To fully appreciate Jesus' *tidings of comfort and joy*, we have to remember a line that comes before that one:

To save us all from Satan's power while we were gone astray...O tidings of comfort and joy.

God saved a remnant from Satan's power in ancient Israel. And just as he chose a remnant to draw out from the darkness then, so too is he saving a remnant today.

Isaiah 3:25-4:1 remind us that humanity *needs saving*. These verse come before the passage we started with today and they provide the context. That context is a great judgment from God. This is the bleak landscape from which the beautiful and glorious Branch will spring.

**Your men shall fall by the sword
And your mighty men in battle.
And her gates shall lament and mourn;
empty she shall sit on the ground.
And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, "We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach.**

Israel's men have fallen in battle. Israel's women are desperate for protection. The consequences of sin have become clear. This is the bleak landscape from which the beautiful and glorious Branch will spring.

We've seen that hope that appears in verse 2. And this continues in **verse 3**, where we find a reminder of God's saving light.

It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy – everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem.

And following that, in verse 4, we again find a reminder of God's judgment against the darkness of sin:

When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion (Zion, in the simplest sense, is another name for Jerusalem) and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning.

The dark backdrop of our world, the sin of every human heart, deserves God's judgment. Here that's described as the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning. The New Testament tells us that the wages of sin is death.

This was true in ancient Israel and that is true today in our world. Israel was God's chosen people. He gave them the Ten Commandments so they could follow his will and he gave them the promised land so they could prosper and multiply in his loving presence. But so often, as we all do, Israel turned back to sin. And when many in Israel turned to sin and stayed there and refused to repent, God would bring a great judgment. Much of the book of Isaiah is a prediction preached to Israel of a great judgment God would bring by means of the mighty nation of Assyria. God would allow Assyria to devastate Israel, allowing many to receive the wages of sin and die. But God preserved a small remnant, so that His great plan for redemption could continue through His people.

And our gratitude for the candle's light grows when we come to understand the reality of the darkness it is set against. We perceive the beauty of the branch more fully when we understand how rocky the soil is.

And as we become more awed by both God's justice and God's mercy, we will find more joy in Advent. We will find ourselves worshipping more deeply in response to this Light, this Branch who is Jesus Christ. Listen to **verses 5 and 6 of Isaiah chapter 4**.

Then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy. There will be a shelter to give shade from the heat by day, and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain.

In Advent, we discover a small light breaking into the darkness, then growing into the brightness of a flaming fire by night. You might also recall this image from the book of Exodus. This flaming fire, God's presence, will illuminate all that we need to see as we walk by faith through this troubled world. We discover a branch, at first almost unnoticeable, then growing into a great canopy, a shelter, refuge from the storm and the rain. We find light. We find shelter.

We find radiant holiness breaking into a world so desperate for it. We find ourselves humbled by its indescribable power.

And that's what we're going to look at in our other passage for today, **Isaiah 6, verses 1 through 7**. God's radiant holiness and power.

In the year of the King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

And one called out to another and said, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.” And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips, For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Then one of the Seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

Here we find the light of Advent in the form of a burning coal. And the backdrop we find here is no longer the bleak darkness of human sin. Rather it's the blazing glory of the Almighty God.

Isaiah experiences a vision of God on high. The Lord sits exalted upon His royal throne. His majestic robe fills the entire temple. Seraphim fly above him, yet these angelic beings cover their faces and feet. Even they have to shield themselves from the blinding power of God's full presence. And did you catch that – even beings created to be in God's presence are unable to behold all the fullness of His glory. They cover their faces.

“Holy, Holy Holy” the seraphim cry out. This is the only chapter in the Bible that the word seraphim appears. Seraphim means “the burning ones” or the “fiery ones”, suggesting a burning love for God. They are able to exist in the presence of God and yet, as we'll see soon, a seraph can also descend into the presence of a human being and deliver atonement.

“Holy, holy, holy” is their cry. These words of worship reflect God's set-apart nature, His perfect sacredness and His purity. This triple use of the word “holy” only appears one other time in the Bible, in Revelation chapter 4. And this other example of “holy, holy, holy” comes right before the Lamb begins opening the seals upon the scroll. The opening of this scroll in Revelation will usher in the return of Christ and bring about the end of the world as we know it. There is a connection, then, between this vision of glory in Isaiah chapter 6 and God's ultimate triumph over all that is evil in this world. “Holy, holy, holy” These three words form a connection between the glory of God's presence and the glory that He will display at the end of time.

With that in mind...when you look at this candle. And when you picture a small flame against the backdrop of this sinful world...don't be fooled by the apparent small size of the flame. Yes, Jesus will come into this world modest in appearance. Like the small Branch, He will not appear to be of significance at first. Yet He is God Almighty in the flesh. Despite appearances, Jesus never ceases to be the Son of the King Upon the lofty and exalted throne, the throne described in Isaiah 6. He never ceases to be one with the Father. Jesus is one with the Father who is so terrifying in his righteousness, that even the seraphim have to shield their eyes from Him.

“Holy, holy, holy.” Holy is the Father. Holy is the Son. Holy is the Spirit.

But unclean, we find, is the prophet in His presence. **Isaiah 6, Verse 5**

Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts”

This is all that any of us could say of ourselves in the presence of the King of Glory. “I am unclean. My people are unclean. Lord almighty, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And immediately upon Isaiah’s cry, mercy descends. Verse 6

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. (Verse 7) He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

See God in the flesh is not just a light to be appreciated from a distance. He is not merely a branch to behold or to seek shade under. God in the flesh is God *with us*. *Jesus is the burning coal* who descends all the way from heaven down to touch our filthy lips and make us clean – And to remain. Jesus has come to dwell with us. In our hearts and in our lives. He is an ambassador to our world from a glory so overwhelming that we would fall down and weep if we could see it in full.

And when He came, this God of glory surrendered himself to the most wretched fate imaginable. And He did that so that we who were born into wretchedness might have the chance to know glory.

Because Jesus not only took on flesh in a world bleak with sin. He took on flesh *for the purpose* of dying a wretched death upon a cross. Our God of glory laid down the privileges of glory and took up the cross.

A newborn child laying in a manger is not what this world calls a picture of hope. And a bloodied man bearing a cross is not a picture of what this world calls love.

But that is how the Light chose to shine into our world. And He shines, not merely that we would look to His light...or that we would admire the light...but that we would *believe* in the light. That we would *trust* and grab hold of the light.

Because it is by faith that the miracle of Christmas becomes a miracle that transforms a soul from within. It is by faith that the promise of the Light, the promise of the Branch, the promise of the holy, holy, holy God Almighty...becomes the eternal possession of a human being. It’s all through faith in Jesus.

So as you reflect on Jesus’ birth in the weeks to come. As you prepare your heart to share “tidings of comfort and joy” with your loved ones. Remember that God in the flesh is not just a light to be appreciated from a distance. Jesus the Messiah is not just a branch to behold. Jesus Christ is “God with us”. He reaches out to touch our unclean lips. He sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. Welcome Him by faith, new or renewed. Cherish His presence. Rejoice in His holiness. And look eagerly toward His return.