

Root of Jesse, Son of David
(Isaiah 11:1-10)

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Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

I want you to imagine a time when the great leaders of the people are just a memory. There was a time, you remember, when the country was led by men who were godly, courageous, upright.

Their names: David, Solomon

Those times, however, came to a crashing end. Do you remember what happened? ‘

First of all, the country divided into tribes: you go here, and you go there. That brought them almost right back to where they had been before David and Solomon, even before Saul, back to when they were first settling the land, divided and squabbling among all the tribes for land, and honour, and water rights, and where to put their cattle and their sheep.

These different tribes were brothers, yes, but only in name, since they were really only half-brothers -- sons of the same father but different mothers, but their descendants were even less related: they were half of a half of a half of a half-brother. They had never really gotten along but the strong leadership of David, then of Solomon, had forced them to do so, as had their enemies.

But now, divided again, this time into two rival sets of brothers, one in the north, called Israel, one in the south, called Judah, they were again at each other's throats like wild animals.

But it was worse. Because once you divide asunder what God has made one, once you rend in two what God has said “let no man break asunder”, division begins not only between the two parts -- as in those horrible divorces we all know about -- but even within each of the two parts. When marriages or relationships break apart: not only do the two partners fight it out, and it becomes very messy, but the internal life of each member of the couple begins to break down.

So, it was in Israel and Judah when the two went their separate ways. They fought against each other and they began to decay from within ... until they were opposed by an external enemy: and then they either worked together, or they worked with the enemy for the other brothers' downfall.

What did the great leaders of the day think when they looked at this mess on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean? Do you think that the great leaders of the day simply stood around, hoping

that it would all turn out for the best? Think about Syria today. All of Syria's enemies ... including the United States ... and friends ... think of Iran ... are ready to step in to do what it takes to secure their own interests.

They just watched, and laughed, and said, 'it will not be difficult to defeat these warring brothers: they're fighting among themselves already'!

That's what George Bush thought about Iraq. He looked at Iraq and thought: This will be easy. Bush wasn't wrong. It would have been easy if he'd been the kind of leader of an empire that would unleash its full strength against a country that was engaged in civil war. Instead of crushing the country, he let the situation go on and on, and it is still going on to this day.

Tiglath-Pileser was not George Bush. Have you ever heard of Tiglath-Pileser? Tiglath-Pileser was the strong, military leader of an incredibly strong, incredibly war-like people, the people of Assyria. When you think of him, think of Hitler. Both looked to the weak, divided lands to the West of them in their day. The lands to the West of Germany, lands that some of you know well, were rich lands, with an opening to the sea, but they were also lands that had spent the last centuries fighting against each other, lands that ended up with people within each land fighting against each other -- Roman Catholics vs. Reformed, Reformed vs. Reformed, re-Reformed vs. un-Reformed -- all easy targets.

Tiglath-Pileser set his eyes on the rich provinces to the West of his land -- on Syria, on the warring brothers Israel and Judah, even on Egypt -- and with the most powerful army that the world had seen to that time, he began his slow, invincible advance, conquering first one, then the next, then the next.

Had the Israelites followed the commands of the God who made Himself known to them in their completely unexpected defeat of the greatest Empire the world had seen when God defeated the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea, Israel might have been able to say "God is with us" and we shall prevail. But, divided? At war with each other? With anarchy raging in the land? With weak leaders? With no apparent concern for God but only for their own safety? And with immorality raging not only among the people but worse among the priests, who were sexually debauched to an extent that would leave clergy sex scandals today looking mild? With priests interested only in their financial well-being, having long forgotten about God or that God might someday intervene? How effective do you think it would be, when the Assyrians assembled on the horizon, and with paganism, drunkenness, debauchery, and sexual license, ruling the land... how effective do you think it will be to cry out: "God will protect us"? Right. As one writer describes Israel: "[L]eaking at every seam, without compass or competent helmsman and with its crew demoralized, [Israel's] ship of state was sinking." (Bright 1981, 272)

If you want the full details of this state of affairs, I recommend that you read the book of the prophet Hosea over the course of this week. There you will see the details of the condition in which Israel found itself staring down the barrel of a gun pointed at it by a strong military leader, with a vast army behind him, and an ideology of unrelenting conquest.

What do you think will happen to a people of God who allow this state of affairs to reign in their land? Let me tell you what happened.

Israel, the northern kingdom, really thought they could withstand the armies of Tiglath-Pileser. They banded together with the kingdom of Damascus -- sound familiar? -- to fight off Tiglath-Pileser and to withstand the advance of the Assyrians from the East.

Judah, the southern kingdom, sought to make peace with Tiglath-Pileser thinking that it was better to be a servant than to be destroyed.

Judah was smart. Tiglath-Pileser, with his almost invincible chariots of iron, advanced on Israel and destroyed it. Tiglath-Pileser's armies covered the land like locusts, destroying everything in sight, including the great city of Damascus. Nothing was left.

He also exiled most of the citizens of Israel to the far reaches of his eastern Empire, where they vanished into his kingdom. Those who would one day, centuries later, return to their own land would return no longer as brothers, sons of Jacob, Jews, but now as Samaritans, half-breeds.

Judah fared better when it sought to make peace with Tiglath-Pileser, but it was now a slave. Tiglath-Pileser essentially owned the land. He took the wealth of the land and told Judah that he wanted them to be completely obedient, which meant also worshipping his gods, not theirs.

And so the king of Judah, Ahaz, was forced to introduce Assyrian idols into the Temple of Jerusalem. He was forced to appear before Tiglath-Pileser in the ruined city of Damascus and worship the gods of Assyria.

The Lord God of Israel was nowhere to be found, not even in his own Temple any longer, a Temple that Solomon had built, now what seemed, so very, very long ago. The paganism that had gained a foothold in both Israel and Judah before the conquest now flourished. And where paganism flourishes, the law of God is no more.

What follows is not surprising. Under Assyrian rule, the wealthy people still living in Judah began to oppress the poor; judges saw no reason not to take bribes; the rich lived in luxury while the vast number of their brothers and sisters in the old religion languished in poverty; the priests became concerned only about their own survival, willing to do anything for a price, and said about sexual purity: why bother? God doesn't care about it anymore. What had been horrible before Assyria had made Judah a slave now became demonic.

And the people said: "You see? We were right: God doesn't care anymore. God isn't active any more. Oh, yes, we remember the stories that our fathers and grandfathers told of a time when God did great things. But, those times are gone. They are no more."

Had God truly forgotten them? Had there been no voice from God?

No. There had been at least one voice, crying out in the wilderness of Judah. "Ahaz, Ahaz", the voice had said before Assyria took control of the land, "Don't make peace with Tiglath-Pileser.

Trust in God, the God of your fathers, the God who brought the people out of Egypt, the God who showed power with His mighty arm.”

Ahaz had looked at Isaiah, the prophet who had uttered these words, and then he had looked to the East where he could see the dust rising from the advance of the troops of Tiglath-Pileser, his iron-chariots, like Panzer tanks, powerful, even invincible, unstoppable.... apparently. And Ahaz had looked back at Isaiah and had said: “You’re crazy. You don’t understand. What can God do against so many?”

Alright, my friends, put yourself in King Ahaz’s position for a moment: what would you have done? The dust clouds are rising on the horizon. Your fate is but hours away. Who are you going to trust? A crazy Bible man? Or your own clever strategies for how to get through this?

I know what you are thinking: I would LIKE to think that I would have trusted in God. I KNOW the end of the story: that Ahaz’s peace treaty with Tiglath-Pileser left Judah even weaker, even more polluted than it was. If only Ahaz had tried Isaiah’s solution.

But, you and I know what we would have done. We would have done the same thing that Ahaz did.

Because we know how the people of God have acted whenever they have been faced with mighty enemies: whether it be the Egyptian armies on the shores of the Red Sea, whether it be with the Barbarians breaking down the doors of Rome, whether it be the Muslim armies at the gates of Constantinople or Vienna, or Hitler at the borders of France or Holland. We will trust in our own strength, even if it is unlikely that we will win. God? What can God do against so many?

Shame on us. But it is what we also teach our children, if not by our words, then by our actions.

What was the alternative that Isaiah offered Ahaz? “Trust in the Lord” and here’s why Isaiah wrote what he did:

From the stock that gave us, from Jesse the father of David and grandfather of Solomon, two leaders the like of which we have never seen, there will come another offspring, a son of David (Isa 11:1).

Essentially Isaiah was telling Ahaz: “Smile, Ahaz, because you are going to be replaced! You can’t do the work of a king, but God will supply someone who can.”

Smile? How could Ahaz smile? He knew that what he was being told was not only that his plan was wrong but because his plan was so wrong, God was going to replace him with a new leader. Smile? When you are being told that God is going to replace you because you haven’t been able to do the work that you were called to do?

Yes, smile, because God will save the people where you have failed to do so. Or, are you more interested in having personal glory than in what is good for your people, whoever it is that leads them?

But, smile, Ahaz, and laugh, too, if you want, because this son of David is not going to defeat Tiglath-Pileser on the field of battle. He won't be a military leader. Smile and laugh, as I know you will, when you say: "But how can anyone BUT a military leader face the hordes from the East that are now at our gates?"

Well, Ahaz, here's how:

"And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins."

Ahaz must have turned to Isaiah at this point and said: "This just goes to show how naive you are. You are telling me that he will not fight? You are telling me that just because of who he is, God will do the fighting for him? That's magic, Isaiah. Is that what you believe?"

To which Isaiah might have answered: "I am not naive, Ahaz, but you are a fool. You don't understand the first thing about God. You think that everything has to be done in human power, judging by what your eyes can see, deciding by what your ears hear. You don't realize that the human way of confronting Tiglath-Pileser or becoming his slave is the way to defeat. Faith, the faith of our fathers, the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses, which believed in spite of what they saw and heard, that is what God wants from you. Tell him what God is going to do."

At this point, we are no longer speculating what Ahaz might have said. Scripture tells us what Ahaz did answer Isaiah. He said to Isaiah: "You're asking too much, Isaiah. I can't do it."

Isaiah knew it. He knew that Ahaz would fail and that all of Judah would pay the price. God had told him so. God had said to Ahaz: "So, Ahaz, it's too much to ask of me, the Lord of the universe, the salvation of your people?"

And so Tiglath-Pileser conquered northern Israel and rendered Judah a slave until Assyria itself was defeated by Babylon. Then Babylon took what was left of Judah into captivity in the same way that Assyria had taken Israel into captivity under Tiglath-Pileser. And they remained, suffering in Babylon for 70 years, singing the song of the Lord in a foreign land, crying out, "How long, o Lord?"

How long indeed. But, of course this is not the end of the story. Where God is concerned this is never how the story ends. Because God was not done with his people yet. God had still not supplied the one that He had said through Isaiah that He was going to supply. He would do so in his own time, in the fullness of time. For in spite of the wolf that had been Assyria, or the leopard that would be Babylon, or the lion that was coming in the form of Rome, God would bring His salvation to fruition, in the form of a completely unexpected king, a son of David, born as a little child, who would lead His people. He would not rule by killing. He would not judge by what his eyes saw or by what his ears heard. When he did eventually appear, Herod would fear for his throne, much as Ahaz must have feared for his own, but he would not have needed to. Ahaz and Herod after him both feared only what they had brought upon themselves and their people: a trust that power rules. They needn't have feared that the sprout of Jesse, the true son of David, was after their throne in Jerusalem. For when he did appear, it was clear that Jesus was not interested in any throne, except for one, shaped like a cross, erected on a hillside, made for criminals, not for kings.

There, one day, he would be lifted up in ignominy and shame to the eyes and ears of men and women, the same eyes and ears of men and women who hear war on the horizon and fear. But, men and women of faith would see, and hear, and know, that he was being lifted up as “an ensign to the peoples” (Isa 11:10), that because of his death and resurrection, even more than because of his life, all the nations would seek him”, and they would glory in that cross. Wherever people would seek him in spirit and truth, there would the glory of God be truly seen, and heard and found. And so it is to this day.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent.

Remember the prayer that I prayed at the beginning? Let me pray it again, and this time hear it as perhaps you didn't hear it at the start:

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation:

Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins,

that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer;

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.