

**We Are Yours, O God:
As with Joy at the Harvest
Isaiah 9:1-7
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Unto them a child was born. Unto them a child was given. He was born on Christmas Day and would become a leader unlike any before him. His lifelong goal was peace and eventually his own people would turn on him and see to his death for it. In case you haven't noticed, it's not Advent yet, so I'm not talking about Jesus, who probably wasn't born on December 25th anyway.

Forty years ago today, the child who had grown into a man emerged from a solitary plane on the tarmac at the normally crowded airport. Security was as tight as it could possibly be. Every single colleague he had in the region had told him not to do it. A neighboring country with whom he had important trade deals severed ties with his country that very day because he did it. Forty years ago today, Christmas-day-born Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt, arrived in Jerusalem for the first face-to-face talks in decades between heads of state of Israel and Egypt. Those decades had been marked by the Yom Kippur War and many other skirmishes large and small, the seizing of the Sinai Peninsula by Israel, and countless unofficial acts of terrorism arguably sponsored by both sides. But Sadat saw that wasn't leading them anywhere. And so he sought peace, just peace, for Egypt and for Israel. The plan he presented on that 36-hour visit to Israel came to fruition a year later in the Camp David Accords when President Jimmy Carter acted as mediator for President Sadat and Prime Minister Menachem Begin. It won Sadat and Begin the Nobel Peace Prize, and despite continued unrest in the region, peace has held between Egypt and Israel to this day.

A new thing — it took a new thing. Today's text is a celebration in advance of a new thing that Isaiah anticipates. It's presented like it has already happened but Isaiah is imagining how he will want to write it when it does happen, when God does a new thing for the oppressed people of Jerusalem and Judah in the 7th century BC. More than once the Assyrians have laid siege to Jerusalem, forcing the people to live under terrible conditions, afraid every day the city will fall. But the lousy king who helped that come to pass is on the way out and Isaiah is imagining how the new King that God is bringing will do things. He has high hopes for this new king Hezekiah, Judah's new king after lousy king Ahaz is gone.

That's right, this passage that we've always used in Christmas Eve before was written about a king of Judah over 700 years before Jesus was born, but that doesn't mean it's not

also talking about Jesus. Something written in one time can have a different meaning for another time, can't it? Isn't that the sign of something special and lasting? That it can have different meanings for different people at different times?

It has been difficult to live in what Isaiah calls the former times. They have seen Israel, the kingdom in the north, beginning to fall to the Assyrians. They have been sieged by the Assyrians themselves. But a latter day is coming. Hezekiah will be a master of negotiation and he will buy the Israelites peace for almost 150 years by paying off the Assyrians and not getting involved in the Assyrian-Egypt rivalry.

It sort of reminds me of poor Lebanon today, a nation caught between the parties in the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict. The President of Lebanon, Mr. Hariri, two weeks ago announced his resignation from within Saudi Arabia. Like the king before Hezekiah, Hariri was caught playing both ends against the middle and he was the loser. Ahaz had done the same thing, though he had also brought soothsayers and worship of other Gods into the lives of the people. So in addition to being a bad politician, he was also not so great on the faithfulness to Yahweh thing. But Hezekiah will be different.

Scholars tell us this Hezekiah story has been very helpful to those who have read it over the years. It was helpful to the people who lived it, moving from the former times of oppression to the latter times of peace and hope reborn. It was helpful two hundred years later for the Hebrew people who had been in exile in Babylon; it helped them move from the former time of exile and oppression into the latter time of a return home to Jerusalem. This was when Cyrus of Persia rose up and defeated the Babylonians and then sent the exiles home.

It has been helpful to all of us who follow Jesus, helping us move from a time without hope against the oppressing powers of this world, both outside and inside each of us, into the latter times of the Peace of Christ we find when we place our hopes in this God who time and again has helped the people survive the difficult and trying times with hope for the future.

It begs the question: Are we yet again in a former time? A time when outside powers threaten, when righteousness (that is actions centered in love for God and God's creation) and justice (actions centered in love and respect for every human being) are once again in short supply?

If you, if we find ourselves in that place where God's people have been so many times before, then today Isaiah has a word of hope for us. Yes, it's a word that we have translated as foreshadowing the coming of Jesus Christ. But it's something beyond that too, something that the incarnation we will celebrate starting in two weeks is a part of, but only a part of.

Did you notice it in the text? If this is to be a text about the coming of the Messiah, isn't it odd that the actual child who is spoken of, the figure who will have those great names, doesn't show up until two thirds of the way through the text? Most of the text is about things God is doing — bringing light to a people in darkness, multiplying the nation, increasing the joy, removing the yoke of oppressing, breaking the rod of the oppressor, tossing the warriors' boots and the bandages of the wounded into the fire. It's not Hezekiah who does all of those things, it's God. Our Reformed Tradition would call this a reminder of God's sovereignty.

Once upon a time, we would make reference to God's sovereign power and say that everything that happens is a fulfillment of God's will. And then the Holocaust came and that theology went up in ash and smoke, and we began to see things anew. And now we speak of God's sovereign love that journeys with us in the terrible times and calls women and men into lives of justice and righteousness for the good of all of creation — to roll down like waters of justice, to be food for the weary, to be Christ's new temple of grace and hope out in the world.

It makes me wonder — if we are in a former time, how is God's sovereign love using us right now to be the new thing that will bring peace and break the oppressor's rod, lifting the burdens of those who suffer and tossing the warriors' boots into the ash heap of history? How is God doing a new thing here, through the Spirit of Jesus Christ acting in each of us and all of us? Are we letting God do those things through us or standing in our own way? It's probably a bit of both.

But look around. There is so much to bring us joy in the ministry and community God has gathered here. We experience joy because of the new things that God is doing in the world, the new things God is doing through us, the new things God has been doing through Jesus Christ for at least 2000 years. And the prophet records our joy at these new things, our joy at being delivered, as the same kind of joy as joy at the harvest and joy in the dividing of what is left over after a war.

Isn't joy at the harvest gratitude about not starving, about not being ruined by a storm or a drought or a locust invasion, about experiencing enough and more than enough so we can share? The joy of the harvest is that we have survived, that we are thriving, that our labors are actually bearing fruit. We see it in the dozens of ministries that were represented at the Mission Fair, in the community engagements we are considering, in transformed lives and we see it in children and young people growing in understanding of what it means to put love in action and to offer ourselves as God's healing, feeding hands for the world.

Friends, the world may now be in a former time and need a word of hope to move to a latter time, but all we need for inspiration for that struggle is to look around at all God has already done here.

Harvest time is a time when we can most directly see how God's abundance can be a source of great joy for us. But at every time of the year, God is constantly harvesting fruits of the Spirit in our midst — when we pray together for one another and the world, when we work for a more just and fair world and a more just and fair church, when we marshal our resources and provide assistance to others. The money, time and talents we share are all part of God's good harvest where needs are met and seeds are planted for future growth.

We consider the joy we have harvested in being the beloved of God, those for whom Jesus lived and died and rose again as a motivation for sharing from the earthly harvest we have because of our own labors, but most importantly, we give thanks.

We give thanks for what we have; we give thanks for a community and a calling and a gracing Christ who every day shows us how to love and how that love can transform our lives and the lives of those we meet.

Yes, we look out into a community and a nation beset by so many challenges, so much division, so much former time suffering. But as with joy at the harvest, we give thanks for the calling we accept, the calling to be Christ's hands and feet and voice and love for all, not naive but hopeful; not ignorant of the challenges, but with memories of how time and again God's people have been her loving agents of a latter time transformation, where peace and justice can again reign for the benefit of all. We are yours, O God. Love us, teach us, empower us and send us, ever seeking your way. Amen.