

Foretelling the Present

December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10

The future: that time which is yet to come, that we eagerly await the arrival of to get the answers to our constantly restocking questions: “What is Heaven like?” “Will I win the lottery?” “Is so-and-so having a boy or a girl?” “What will I get for Christmas?” As humans, we are curious about what is yet to come. So, we get our fortunes told and read our horoscopes. We buy fortune cookies to find out what our lucky numbers are for the next lottery and what the future has in store for us. Some of us (myself included) skip to the end in mystery books because we need to know “who done it”. We even encourage our youth to plan for the future by asking them where they want to go to school, what they want to major in, what they want to do with their lives, all from the age of 5. I’ve no doubt Katie’s and my oldest niece (now only 11) has some idea of what she wants her wedding dress to look like and what kind of a person she’d want to marry. We are a very future-driven species in this day and age.

When we think of the prophets in the Bible, this often is the perception we get of what it is they do: they relay the words of God regarding what is yet to come and they have visions of times and places both far off and near at hand. Last week’s reading was a great example of that. Isaiah 1 was a relaying of God’s words of the punishment/destruction God intended against His children for their sinfulness, and Isaiah 2 is a vision of a time where all God’s children are in one place, no longer knowing war but united. Today’s passage is no different. It speaks of a coming savior, one who is yet to come but is fast approaching. We can see this is a foretelling of what is yet to come based on the language used. In these ten verses, the word “shall” appears 20 times (twice per verse on average) and the word “will” appears twice. “A shoot *shall* come out of the stump of Jesse.” “The spirit of the Lord *shall* rest on him.” “They *will* not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” 22 times we get sentences like this, almost as if Isaiah is sitting before people with his hands up to his head like he’s in some clairvoyant trance or like he’s sitting in front of this divinely-endowed crystal ball. So, Isaiah’s simply telling the future here, right?

Wrong. In saying what this Savior will be like and how the world will be once he/she arrives, Isaiah is simultaneously critiquing the past (how things *have* been) and the present (how things *are*), because why would the Savior need to be these things unless they have been previously or presently are somehow absent? Why would this coming image of the world to come sound so glorious unless the current world wasn’t so? Let’s take a few minutes and break this passage down with this in mind. V. 3a: “His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.” We have here a critique of the lack of reverence for God among the peoples in this place, as they are about to be overtaken by Assyrians for their sinfulness. V. 3b: “He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear.” So, this coming Savior and guide won’t judge others based on what they think they saw or hearsay they might hear, but will judge with righteousness and purity of heart. V. 5: “Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.” If everyone had these qualities, these words wouldn’t sound so amazing and revelatory. This is a shedding of light upon the wickedness and faithlessness of so many in this time and place. Vv. 6-8, we see many references to wolves, leopards, lions, and other predatory beasts as well as venomous snakes, but they’re not preying upon or harming the lambs, the fatlings, the kids, or the children. Remember from a couple weeks ago that “wolves,”

“lions,” and other such creatures are used to represent deceitful leaders and enemies of God’s people. Snakes were often viewed as representing those who intentionally misguide people because of the snake in Eden. However, this isn’t the case now. All are eating and playing side-by-side. These lambs, kids, “nursing” or “weaned” children, these images of innocence and vulnerability, they represent the defenseless (widows, orphans, aliens, etc.). Yet, no harm is befalling them. Justice is rolling down like an ever-flowing stream in this image. While this is a grand image of a land where peace prevails and “people no longer learn war,” we have at the same time a critique of humanity’s constant push to overtake, to be the “alpha” in a particular way.

In short then, this is what a prophet does: sees what is going on in the world, the good and the bad, while recognizing the power of God as being beyond able to fix any wrongs in the world. In the modern day, we hear stories on the news of shootings in schools and workplaces, children being kidnapped on their way to/from school, the wide spread of mental illness and its effects, so on and so forth. All these stories paint for us a very gloomy image, one where it seems we have no hope or peace. However, there is hope. Rather than pointing out only what is wrong with the world, prophets like Isaiah point out the power of God to shine a light in the darkness and the coming of a time and place where such doom and gloom will not be remembered anymore. This hope brings us peace, a peace that we are called by the prophets and Jesus our Savior to share. As one author writes, “Prophets are not interested in spectators.” In other words, we are meant to spread the Word, to show its presence and power to others, rather than just receive it. Put another way, “While waiting for that promised glorious kingdom to come, God’s kingdom people are called to point to, work for, shout out, and claim the reign of God now.” We are called to be prophets of a sort, to point to the coming of something beyond great, something and someone that will make us forget we ever felt pain. We are called to point to all that is wrong with the world and to show how already God is at work unraveling the knots and making straight our paths that all might someday find their way to the mountain of the Lord, therein living in peace.

We don’t need to crack open thousands of fortune cookies or get our tarot read to see the future. The future is coming, and it’s already making a difference in the present. God’s future is at work in the present by the power of the Holy Spirit which guides our words, our actions, and our hearts, all of which call for peace, love, and justice in plethora. God is at work in, through and around us, revealing God’s kingdom that is already making itself known. All we need to do to see what will be is to open our eyes and see what already is.