

**HOPE REALIZED!**

**Fourth Sunday of Advent<sup>1</sup>**

**Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170**

**Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 12.19.2004**

<sup>Isa 8:21</sup>They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

<sup>9:1</sup>But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness

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<sup>1</sup> Isa 9:2-7; Ps 96; Luke 2:1-20; Titus 2:11-14.

from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (Isa 8:21-9:7, NRSV).

For me, and perhaps for others as well, the primary problem of this passage is the violins. Yes, the violins. After all, who can read it without hearing the violins in Handel's *Messiah* striking up the introduction to "For unto us a child is born . . ." The best commentary on Isaiah 9 may very well be found in the musical composition of Handel's *Messiah*. He captured the drama of the text with the shift from the dark, minor mode of verse 2—"The people that walked in darkness"<sup>2</sup>—to the major key of verse 6—"For unto us a child is born."<sup>3</sup>

But let's backup to the last two verses of chapter 8 and the first verse of chapter 9. These words describe the situation of those people in the northern kingdom of Israel who had experienced the ravages of the Assyrian war machine as it marched through their territory toward Samaria and eventually Jerusalem. These citizens of Israel are depicted as distressed, hungry, enraged, and cursing both their king and their God. They look about them and they see only gloom, distress, anguish, and thick darkness. The prophet's words that follow in chapter 9 now address these discouraged and broken people with a message of hope and joy.

The prophet pronounces three reasons for future joy in verses 4-6.<sup>4</sup> First, the oppression of the cruel Assyrians will be broken. Second, the war will be over. The battlefields will be cleaned up and all the military equipment burned. Third, and clearly the climax, is the birth of a son. This child will grow up to be a great king, a king from the line of David. Such promises of the coming Davidic ruler take up the themes expressed in the Royal Psalms from the days of King David. After the monarchy, when there were no more kings, these promises projected into the future a portrait of an ideal king to come. This coming king would be the "anointed one"—the Messiah.

It is the conviction of the New Testament that these ancient promises about a coming Messiah find their fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew sees the work of Jesus, which began in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, as the fulfillment of the

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<sup>2</sup>Air for Bass, #11.

<sup>3</sup>Chorus, #12.

<sup>4</sup>Note that vv. 4, 5, and 6 (vv. 3, 4, and 5 in Hebrew) each begin with "for" (׀ַּ־ *ki*).

promise in Isaiah 9.<sup>5</sup> Luke records the promise of a child made to Mary, a promise using the language of Isaiah 9.<sup>6</sup> Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report the incident at Caesarea Philippi, where Peter confessed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah.<sup>7</sup>

Centuries after Isaiah's promise, something quite spectacular happened in the little town of Bethlehem. Luke records it this way:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"  
(Luke 2:1-14, NRSV).

The emperor Octavian was a prominent figure who solidified the somewhat divided loyalties of the various regions of the empire and ushered in the famous Roman Peace.<sup>8</sup> In 27 B.C., the Roman senate gave him the title "the August One." Poets wrote of his peaceful ideas and anticipated that his reign would signal a golden age based on virtue. Ancient monuments even ascribed to him the title "savior." He represented a high and hopeful moment in Roman history. However, Octavian—Caesar Augustus—was to be succeeded by rulers who turned the imperial dreams into nightmares.

Announced against the background and within the boundaries of Caesar's world is the birth of another ruler, from the lineage of David, whose meager and mild beginnings do

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<sup>5</sup>Matt 4:12-17.

<sup>6</sup>Luke 1:26-35; 2:11.

<sup>7</sup>Matt 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-20.

<sup>8</sup>*Pax Romana*.

not compare with the power and promise of Augustus. All the world obeys the Caesar, but Jesus' parents are rejected and relegated to a cattle stall. The gospel-writer Luke does not present a confrontation between Augustus and Jesus, but provides a contrast: a contrast between false hopes and true hopes, between human potential and divine promise, between the imposing but short-lived dominion of Caesar's rule and the humble manifestation of the eternal dominion of God, between the peace of Rome and the peace of Christ. Jesus—not Augustus—is Savior, Messiah, and Lord!

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