

Every Sunday in Advent, our Old Testament readings have come from Isaiah. We've heard about beating swords into plowshares; how a little child will lead them; that Zion will return singing; and today: a young woman will become pregnant and will give birth. You will name the child Immanu-El. Isaiah is considered the prophet of Advent. Why is that?

Most Christians would say... \*Shrug\* "I dunno." But if you pressed or perhaps promised a prize, a lot of us would guess that we hear Isaiah during Advent because Isaiah foretells the birth of Christ. This is called a Christological reading of Isaiah, and it is a long-standing tradition in the church. We see how it is still active today, from quoting Isaiah on Christmas cards to the fact that we heard the Isaiah reading paired with the Matthew gospel reading in church this morning.

While hearing Isaiah in worship, our Advent adult education series has been discussing this Isaiah Advent tradition through Tyler Mayfield's book, Unto Us a Child is Born. Using biblical scholarship and pastoral concern, Mayfield asks us to examine how this long-time Christian interpretation of Isaiah affects us, our understanding of the Bible, and our relationship with our Jewish neighbors.

The effects are not great. In particular, our interpretation doesn't leave much room for Judaism, does it? If Isaiah is talking about Christ, then what meaning does the text have for those who do not recognize Christ as the Messiah?

Some of us might see this as an "agree to disagree" situation. Jews and Christians just understand who Jesus is differently. But the Christological reading of Isaiah is more than that. It is harmful and dangerous, based in supersessionism, a Christian theology that asserts Christians have replaced the ancient Israelites as the true people of God. This is not a theology of difference but one of supremacy. This is kind of theology perpetuates anti-Semitism. I hope you will join us for our adult ed series in January when we will have more in-depth conversations about this topic.

For our own faith, is the message of Advent really that God abandons and replaces God's people and breaks God's promises? No, quite the opposite. But that is the message of this kind of interpretation.

When I was working on this sermon, I kept remembering this old shampoo commercial. A celebrity holding a bottle of shampoo says, "We've always been told to wash our hair starting with the ends. But what if we've gotten it all wrong?" And then the camera flips upside down as she goes on to say the key to healthy hair is starting at the roots.

I know that a lot of sermons seem to be based on how we've gotten it all wrong. But I think about what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, that God is turning the world upside down, which is really right side up. It's the flip that we're being invited into. Not doing something different from a place of shame or because it's politically correct or the latest scholarship fad, but because this change, this turn, invites us deeper into a life with God and each other, that is right side up.

Mayfield makes this turn using what he calls Christian liturgical hermeneutics. A very fancy mouthful that basically means we interpret biblical readings using the lens of the liturgical season in which we're hearing them. We don't downplay or defend, but return. We listen to the text. We take the liturgical season seriously. So, what *could* it mean for Christians to call Isaiah the Prophet of Advent?

Isaiah prophesied during a tumultuous time for Jerusalem. If we go back up a few verses to the beginning of Isaiah 7, we learn that two nearby kings have formed an alliance against King Ahaz in Jerusalem. Ahaz is terrified and vulnerable. He does not know if he or his people are strong enough to face what is ahead. God sends Isaiah to tell Ahaz that the kings will not succeed and to continue trusting in God.

We pick up at verse 10, where Isaiah tries to reassure Ahaz with a sign, any sign: make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven! Ahaz says he will not test the Lord, which Isaiah sees not as piety but as further refusal to trust in God.

God is nothing if not persistent, so Isaiah gives Ahaz and his people a sign anyway: Isaiah predicts a virgin birth and a baby Messiah...or does he?

The most accurate translation of the verse in Isaiah is this: Therefore, my God will give you all a sign: Look! The young woman is pregnant and about to give birth to a son. She will name him With-us-is-God. By the time he knows to reject evil and choose good, he will eat cream and honey. Before the youth knows to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings whom you abhor will be abandoned.

Today the default image of a prophet is someone who predicts the future. But, as Mayfield says, prophets in the Old Testament were not foretellers but forth-tellers: they stepped forth to tell the leaders of their day the truth of people's suffering and to proclaim what God was doing to set things right. The prophet's message was not a prediction but a confirmation. So, too, signs were things the people experienced in the here and now.

In other words, Isaiah is not predicting a birth that is hundreds of years off, he is pointing to a pregnant woman among them. Grounded in the needs and concerns of the people living now. God's sign to them is a birth announcement. Not announcing the birth of a messiah, that is a Jewish concept that didn't exist yet, but of a child. A sign of new life in the face of looming death. To keep things spicy, it is neither the prophet nor the king who gives the birth announcement. It is the child's mother: *She* will name him With-us-is-God. Like Mary will do centuries later, she gives her testimony, declaring boldly that God is with them. As Phyllis Till puts it, "When this child is named by his mother . . . She is echoing Jerusalem's confidence, showing herself to be a daughter of Jerusalem, taking her stand in the midst of crisis..." By pointing to what God is doing, she becomes part of it. A sign of trusting in God, as Isaiah has urged Ahaz to do. Finally, this sign reorients the people to mark time, not based on enemy rulers or the size of armies, but the years of a childhood.

When we can pull back the Christological reading that has been applied over and over again, we see something different than a long-ago prediction about a supernatural birth. But no less faithful. The text in Isaiah can stand on its own - for Christians and for Jews - and powerfully proclaim God as the One who desires to be in our lives and assure us in the face of great difficulties. The Holy One who comes among us.

THIS is the message of Advent. And so this interpretation takes the liturgical season seriously. It takes the beliefs and well-being of our Jewish neighbors seriously. It takes our own struggles and fears seriously. It takes God's promise to and presence with us seriously.

And it brings us into living stories and a living faith. How does the here-and-now-ness of the text change how we talk about hope? Are there prophets and signs among us today? What happens if we experience a sign and trust in God, but the worst still happens? I don't know. But aren't these the actual questions for our actual lives? Which is right where God wants to be: with us, saying, "Ask for a sign." Will we?

God is turning the world upside down, which is really right side up. And so, as the psalmist prays, Turn us again, thou God of hosts; show the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole. Amen.