

To Us A Child Is Born: Mighty God
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
December 10, 2017 – AM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Isaiah 9:2-7

This morning we return to the advent prophecy of Isaiah 9. Throughout this Advent will focus on the four titles given to the Messiah in Isaiah 9. Last week Mike talked about how the Messiah will be the *wonderful counselor*, this week we will think about the promise that He will be Mighty God. Let's hear the promise. (Read Isaiah 9:2-7)

The prophecy of Isaiah 9 is almost always read around Christmastime. We always hear it in this season where we are hanging twinkle lights, drinking egg nog, planning parties and generally being festive. That means when we hear it, it's in a context of good feeling. These words evoke for us a context of food, family and festivities.

The people who first heard Isaiah prophecy were not living in this sort of context. I want us to hear the promise of a Messiah who would be mighty God in its original context. To do that I want you to imagine a Hebrew living in Jerusalem in Isaiah's day. Let's call him Simeon. And as we visit Simeon he is just sitting down in his living room after dinner to read the evening newspaper. So Simeon sits in in his chair, opens his newspaper and gives it a shake.

Stretching across the top of page one is a frantic headline: "*Aram and Ephraim form Alliance. War Declared on Jerusalem.*" Simeon's brow furrows as he reads the story below.

In news that must surely strike fear into the hearts of all residents of our city, sources in Damascus tell us that Rezin king of Aram and Pekah, king of the Northern Tribes have put aside their differences and formed a military alliance. When asked the purpose of this alliance Rezin was quoted as saying, "We will invade Judah, tear it apart and divide it among ourselves!" (Is 7:6) Residents of Jerusalem are advised to take immediate protective measures."

Simeon's heart is already pounding when he reads another headline further down the page. "Assyrian Army Marches Westward; Burns Everything in its Path" The alliance between Aram and the Northern Kingdoms might be scary, but that was nothing compared to the Assyrians. The Assyrians were baddest dudes on the block. Their horses were bigger, their chariots were faster and their arrows flew further. Plus they were ruthless.

"Reports from the front tell horrible tales of slaughter. In every town the men are put to the sword, the women are enslaved, and the bodies of the town rulers are hung up in the public square as a demonstration of what happens to people who resist. No one seems to know how far west the Assyrians will ride. Will their slaughter come all the way to Jerusalem?"

Simeon sighed and put down the paper. There was a heaviness in his chest. He looked out his window over the city. Everyone in Jerusalem was trying to act normal and go about their business like everything was ok. But you could feel the fear and the uncertainty everywhere you went. So... Isaiah prophesies in a context of fear. Jerusalem was weak and vulnerable. And there were multiple foreign powers threatening them. It was not a twinkle light and egg nog kind of time. It was a sleepless night kind of time. Here's how chapter 7 describes it: "*The hearts of king Ahaz and his people were shaken as trees are shaken by the wind.*"

Now, with that context, imagine Simeon sits down the next day with his paper and flips it open to find this headline: "Isaiah Proclaims Latest Prophecy: Mighty One to Execute the Zeal of the Lord Against His Enemies." And then under that headline were the words of our passage, words about the zeal of the Lord achieving justice and righteousness, and doing it through this person whose name shall be called Mighty God. How do you think someone like Simeon would hear this prophecy? What would Isaiah's promise of a mighty God make him expect?

I'll tell you what I would expect if I were in his position. I would hear this prophecy as the promise of a leader who will take care of all these enemies who are making my life miserable! When Isaiah calls the Messiah a *Mighty God*, I would picture a warrior with broad shoulders and a strong jaw. 6'4" with wavy hair. Rippling muscles. A man who knew how to use a sword. A man who looked good riding in a chariot. A man who could stand in front of a group of discouraged soldiers and give a rousing speech that would make them raise their fist and cheer!

I think that's what Simeon would expect because that's what this passage seems to promise. His name will be called 'mighty God.' In the Hebrew the words are *El-Gibbor*. His name will be called *El-Gibbor*. The word *gibbor* occurs throughout the Old Testament and it is always associated with warrior strength. For example: in 1 Chronicles 12 it talks about King David's Mighty men of valor – the men who fought with them. They are described as “*brave warriors, ready for battle, able to handle the shield and the spear. Their faces were the faces of lions, and they were as swift as gazelles upon the mountains.*” The Chronicler says that the least of these men could slay a hundred in battle.

In Hebrew these men are called the *gibborim*...it's the same word Isaiah uses for mighty God in our passage. So when Isaiah promises a Messiah who will be Mighty God – *el-gibbor* – what do you think pops into Simeon's head? Where do you think his mind goes? To a warrior! To a man so strong that he will smash those Assyrians and shatter the yoke that burdens them. A man so wise we will reign on David's throne forever. A man whose shoulders are so broad, that the weight of government could rest upon them. Simeon and all the rest of Jerusalem would be on tiptoes waiting for this broad shouldered man of valor who would make Jerusalem great. The zeal of the Lord will accomplish it!

So that's the expectation that this passage would raise in the mind of a fearful person. Now let's fast forward 600 years. Assyria's power has waned and now Rome is menacing Jerusalem. Same fear; different army. Into this context a man comes to Jerusalem. When this man was born, an angel made a promise to his mother that even sounds a little like Isaiah. “*Your son will be great! He will be called the Son of the most High. He will have the throne of his father David and he will reign on that throne forever!*” Wow! Sounds like this could be the guy! Sounds like he might be that mighty man Isaiah talked about.

But instead of bursting upon the world as a champion whose shoulders are broad enough to hold the government like verse 6 promises, he comes as a baby whose shoulders are smaller than the span of your hands. And *instead of breaking the yoke and shattering the rod of their oppressors* like verse 4 promises, in his life he doesn't really say much about Rome at all. He doesn't cry out against foreign invaders. He doesn't make passionate political speeches. In fact, he sometimes even makes nice with the enemy. He admires the faith of centurion and heals his child. He invites a Roman collaborator – a tax collector - to be part of his inner circle.

And then instead of bringing justice and righteousness like verse seven promises, he doesn't confront the moral decay, or at least not the way you thought. I mean, here are all these terrible things happening in society – Sabbath breaking, tax collectors ripping people off, prostitution – and he is kind of lax with the Sabbath, he eats with the tax collectors and prostitutes. He tells these stories where Samaritans and rebellious sons are celebrated and hardworking older brothers - people like you and me - are left out in the darkness.

There are all sorts of terrible things going on out there – really perverse stuff – and instead of calling those people out he points the finger at me, calls *me* to take the plank out of my own eye, calls *me* to repent, calls *me* to justice and righteousness.

How would you react to someone who claimed to be the Messiah come to rescue you from your trouble, but who didn't take care of the things that you thought of as your trouble? Well you would be furious with him. You would be ticked. You might even be angry enough that if you got together with your angry friends you might call for his arrest, you might take those narrow Galilean shoulders that were supposed to carry a government and put a cross beam on those shoulders instead, you might smile when the soldiers hang him up to die, you might even shout a few things at him while he hangs there, “*Hey MESSIAH! Hey Jesus! Why don't you save yourself! You're supposed to be a Mighty God who defeats our enemies, but you're just a carpenter on a cross!!*”

We all want Jesus to be a kind of Mighty Warrior; We want him to be our *el-gibbor*. We're all holding on for a hero. We want Jesus to be that broad shouldered hero who comes and rescues us from our trouble – whether that's the Assyrian Army, or the Roman occupation, or that cancer diagnosis, or our financial trouble, or that rift in our family. Mighty God save us! But then he comes as this frail child lying in a manger whose road leads to a cross. And he turns to us and calls us to walk that road with him ...well... that's not what we had in mind.

Ultimately, for Isaiah's prophecy, it comes down to this. Looking up at the man hanging on the cross, you have two choices: you can say that this man hanging there, weak and dying, cannot possibly be Mighty God. In that case you walk

away and join the rest of humanity looking for some other broad shouldered hero who promises you prosperity and happiness. Or, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you can fall to your knees and acknowledge that this man, the carpenter offering forgiveness to the ones who just tortured him, is in fact the one Isaiah promised. He is mighty God. Only he is changing forever what being mighty looks like. He is changing forever how we see power.

We talk about the cross as a time of Jesus weakness, as a time of Jesus submission to his Father's will, and it is that. But it is also a moment of enormous transcendent power. Jesus is never more powerful than when he is dying on the cross. Because that is the moment where the power of death is broken. That is the moment where Jesus hoists the savage weight human sin on his shoulders, pays for it then hurls it into the depths of the sea. That is the moment when the grace of God breaks through the wall of our pride and our denial and our anger and lays claim to our rebellious hearts. That is the moment when Jesus Christ the Son of David establishes his throne with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forever. And it is the zeal of the Lord that is accomplishing it. I declare to you: That child lying in the manger, that broken man hanging on the cross is your mighty God, your *el-gibbor*. He is your only hope in all your stuff.

And that means Jesus changes forever what might looks like in the Kingdom of God. He changes where you look to see Mighty God. He changes the places you look to see the zeal of the Lord accomplishing his purposes.

We have a group of women get together and knit. They do it because they love to knit and they love to be together. They laugh a lot and usually have some baked goods to nibble on and some coffee to drink. But they do more than knit, in fact their knitting is a kind of prayer. They are knitting prayer shawls. These shawls are brought to the people in the congregation laid up with cancer or other serious diseases. The afflicted person can put the shawl around his shoulders and tangibly feel prayers of the God's people. They are enfolded in prayer. None of these knitters is particularly broad shouldered or intimidating, but if you look closely you can see the power of the Mighty God. You can see the zeal of the Lord accomplishing his purposes.

Somewhere a husband is taking care of his wife. She has dementia and her world has become smaller and smaller. His face is one of the few things left in her world that is familiar to her. His face is one of the few things that orients her and makes her feel safe. And so he spends as much time with her as he possibly can. And when he's there he tries to be present; he tries to make sure his face is not a face of exhaustion and sadness, but a face of love. When the two are sitting together, it just looks like an old couple in a room, but if you look closely you can see the power of the Mighty God; the zeal of the Lord accomplishing his purposes.

In his book *Vanishing Grace* Philip Yancey tells the story of a woman he met in South Africa. Her name is Joanna Flanders-Thomas. Joanna was an ordinary Christian woman who lived in South Africa during the terrible struggle that moved the country from Apartheid to democratic rule. After the Nelson Mandela had become president she looked for a way to help her nation move from violence and mistrust to peace. She decided she would become a visitor to one of South Africa's most violent prisons. She visited prisoners daily. Every day she brought them a simple gospel message of Jesus' love and forgiveness for them. Every day she listened to their stories of abusive childhoods and bad decisions. The prisoners came to love and trust her. The year before she started to visit there were 279 acts of violence in that prison. After a year of Joanna's visits, there were only 2.

The power of the mighty God. The zeal of the Lord. It's everywhere. It was in the manger, it was poured out on the cross, and I feel quite sure that it's in you.