

3rd Sabbath in Advent
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ISAIAH, CHRISTMAS AND YOU

Isaiah 12:2-6

A Different Christmas

The first time I visited the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem that houses the “Great Isaiah Scroll” I was captivated by the scroll and by its story. It was found by Bedouin shepherds in 1947, along with six other scrolls, in Cave 1 at Qumran, a first-century monastic community of Jewish Essenes, near the northern end of the Dead Sea. In subsequent years more than 200 Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

The Bedouins sold the Isaiah scroll to an antique dealer who happened to be a member of the Syrian Orthodox Church. The dealer sold it to the Metropolitan Bishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church in East Jerusalem who brought the scroll to the U.S. It was sold to an Israeli archeologist for \$250,000 in 1954 and returned to Israel. After scholars had studied, photographed, and carbon-dated the scroll, it was placed in the Shrine of the Book for people like you and me to see.

The Great Isaiah Scroll is the oldest (by more than 1,000 years) and the most complete copy of the Book of Isaiah—a biblical treasure! And it is very impressive, written on 17 sheets of parchment, 24 feet

long, and 11 inches wide. It was copied by hand in Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew spoken at the time, the language Jesus spoke. People of faith are very fortunate to have Isaiah's scroll. I am very grateful to the Essenes who copied and carefully stored it, the shepherds who found it, the archeologist who bought and returned it to Jerusalem, Isaiah's home.

What do we know about Isaiah whose writings are contained in this ancient scroll? We know that his name means, "God saves" or "God will save," which really describes the prophet's faith, life and ministry. We know from the first chapter that he was the son of Amoz and that he lived in the 8th century before Christ and prophesied in Jerusalem and Judea during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, from around 740 to 700 B.C., described in chapters 1-39, commonly called "First Isaiah." We know that Isaiah was a faithful visionary who looked at his world and his people and saw what God wanted them to become.

We know from the 6th chapter that he had a wonderful vision in the Temple in Jerusalem in the year that King Uzziah died. "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple." Seraphs, heavenly beings with six wings, flew back and forth as they sang, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The temple shook and filled with smoke. Isaiah cried

out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet, my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” One of the Seraphs flew to Isaiah, holding a live coal taken with tongs from the altar, touched his lips and said, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then, Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And he replied, “Here am I; send me.” In his vision of God’s call, the Lord also gave Isaiah a saving message for the people of Jerusalem and Judah and their rulers.

Isaiah lived in perilous times. The nation and its leaders had turned away from the Lord. Corruption and evil were rife. Murder and mayhem were the order of the day. Furthermore, Judah and Jerusalem were threatened by international enemies. Sounds familiar! Isaiah called upon the people to change, to become faithful to God, to “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”(1:16-17) Otherwise, he says, Jerusalem and Judah will suffer defeat by their enemies.

Inspired by God, Isaiah casts a vision of a new age ushered in by a Messiah, one anointed by God, a vision we often read during Advent: “the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government will be

upon his shoulders; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”(9:2,6) Amazing!

In the 9th chapter Isaiah envisions a “peaceable kingdom” God will bring about through the Messiah: “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and reverence for the Lord.” . . . who will judge with righteousness, equity and faithfulness. He describes a kingdom where “the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. They will not hurt or destroy, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as waters cover the sea.” It is a beautiful vision of what God wanted for the world.

Unfortunately, Isaiah’s vision was not realized in his own lifetime, but it continued to define the hope of people of faith who looked for that day when God would send the Messiah to bring about his vision of peace, justice and goodwill in the world. Early Christians and the gospel writers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision of the Messiah. Isaiah is quoted in all four gospels.

At the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph who had resolved to divorce Mary quietly because she

was pregnant. The angel tells him that the child is God's Messiah and is the fulfillment of God's Word in Isaiah 7:14: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name in Immanuel, meaning 'God with us.'"(1)

Mark, which has no birth narrative, begins his gospel with a quotation from Isaiah 40:3 describing John the Baptist: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"(2)—the very same text quoted in the first chapter of John's gospel.(3) It's clear they believed Jesus to be the One to fulfill God's vision of salvation.

At the beginning of his ministry in Luke's gospel, Jesus stood and read from Isaiah in the synagogue on the Sabbath, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He rolled up the scroll, sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."(4) Jesus defined his life and his ministry by God's vision in Isaiah.

It seems that God has been conveying a magnificent vision to the world for more than 2,500 years, a vision that Isaiah grasped and passed on, a vision that largely, defined Jesus' life and ministry, a vision that

was conveyed by the church throughout the centuries since, a vision desperately needed in our world today, that we need in our lives: *God's vision of peace, justice, and goodwill for all people*. This vision, incarnate in Jesus, is our salvation. Isaiah's text for today is a hymn of thanksgiving for that vision and to God in whom we can trust and not be afraid, who is our strength and our salvation.

The Bible says, "Where there is no vision the people perish." (Prov. 29:18) Do you have a vision for your life? Does it begin with God's vision? God has given us a magnificent vision, a vision that can provide direction, meaning, purpose and fulfillment for your life as well as make a positive difference in the lives of others and in the world.

Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus who dedicated himself to God's vision for the world, worked for it, died for it and rose again to keep that vision of our salvation alive—and even today invites us to embrace God's intention for our lives and our world as did Isaiah and the One we call Savior. God loves you and all people. God has a vision for you and your life. Embrace the vision. Follow Jesus. And give thanks, as did Isaiah, to God in this Holy Season. Amen.

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1. Matt. 1:18-24
2. Mark 1:1-4
3. John 1:19-23
4. Luke 4:16-2; Isa. 61:1, 58:6, 61:2