

Isaiah 2, 11, and 9 “Desires, Wishes, and Promises”

It's been said that history has a way of repeating itself. This is unfortunate too, because often what we repeat are the bad things. The story of the Bible is the story of God's relationship with God's people. As you read it, you can see a pattern – 1.) *God desires* a world where we are good stewards of our resources, where we treat each other with kindness and love, and where we look after those who are hurting or in trouble ... even if they're not a part of our “tribe.” 2.) But some *people desire* the power to kill, enslave, and oppress others and that's exactly what they do. 3.) The *people who are on the receiving end of the oppression desire* to be free ... they are liberated and ... 4.) They find themselves wandering around looking for a *promise* land where they can settle down and take up residence. 5.) The *settled people then dream* about a *promised* time where they won't be torn apart by internal factions, or ruled by corrupt elites, or dominated by whatever neighboring nation is looking to build an empire.

Welcome to the story of humankind. Not only do we see this pattern in the Bible, we see this same narrative played out with *all* of God's people throughout the world. Desire for good, desire for the power to dominate, liberation for those under oppression, re-grouping while struggling with internal conflicts ... all the while hoping for a time and place where people can live in peace and harmony. No matter what point in history we're talking about, all of these stories involve desires, hopes, and dreams.

Now this morning, I want to make a distinction between desires, hopes, and dreams and wishes. Desires, hopes, and dreams inspire action. Wishing is the opposite. Wishing is a substitute for action. According to Brian McLaren, “Wishing creates a kind of passive optimism that can paralyze people in a happy fog of complacency.” Oh, hey ... everything will work out in the end! No need to get all riled up and stir the pot. This is just a passing storm. If we just hunker down, the sun will come out tomorrow and we will bask in the rays of glorious light. We don't

need to spend any unnecessary time working or planning, or struggling or sacrificing! It's all good. Luck will be on our side. God is on our side!" But you know what? This rarely happens because things rarely work out the way we *wish*.

But when we're guided by our desires, hopes, and dreams ... especially when they're backed up by a promise, we're more likely to be motivated to action! If you *wish* to win the lottery ... all you need to do is remember to buy a lottery ticket. But if, let's say, you desire, or hope, or dream of becoming a doctor or a rocket scientist, or an airplane pilot, or a teacher ... you've got to take action. You've got to make sacrifices, study, and spend time in the field in order to achieve the level of proficiency necessary to do any of those things. A person's hope for the future guides them to act now. You can't wish for these things ... you can only let hope guide and shape your actions.

Let's talk about prophets. Prophets in the Bible play a special role in the story of God's people because they are often the *custodians* of their people's hopes, desires, and dreams. In other words, they challenge people to act out on those hopes, desires, and dreams so they just don't sit around *wishing* things were different. And if the people under their care start doing things that are harmful, then the prophets speak up and say, "Listen ... you don't want to go down this road, because if you do, bad things will certainly happen." We get the wrong idea about prophets sometimes. We think they can somehow predict the future as if they had some holy crystal ball. But honestly, what most prophets do is relay God's message: "If you keep on doing this, you're going to find yourselves in a world of hurt." Or, "If you repent ... if you turn from the direction you're heading right now, you will definitely benefit! The blessings will blow your mind!" You don't need precognitive powers to preach this message, you just need to be familiar with history.

This morning, we've heard and will continue to hear from the Book of Isaiah. Here's what I want you to do before you get a picture of a guy named, "Isaiah" in your head. Instead of looking at Isaiah as a single

person, think of Isaiah as a prophetic tradition. Because when you read Isaiah, it becomes pretty clear that there are three different authors addressing three different time periods.

You can find “First Isaiah” in the first 39 chapters of the book. The message here is to the people living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah right before the Northern Kingdom of Israel was invaded by the Assyrians. First Isaiah warned the southerners about the sin of complacency and how their contentment with the way things were would lead to defeat. First Isaiah’s audience were wishers. They just wanted to hide their heads in the sand and wish that the Assyrians would leave them alone.

Second Isaiah takes up the next 15 chapters of the book, and addresses the folks from Judah who ended up in exile in Babylon. Clearly they didn’t pay too much attention to First Isaiah’s warning because in 587 BC, the Babylonians came in and brought all the movers and shakers in both kingdoms back to Babylon, which in modern terms is Iraq. So on one hand, they got their wish. The Assyrians didn’t get them, the Babylonians did. And what did the exiles do? According to Psalm 137, the exiles got caught up in the wishing game too. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem.” They wished they could return home. But Second Isaiah’s message to the exiles was a hopeful one. “If you can turn your wishing to hope, one day you’ll be able to return to your homeland! And then you can rebuild!” And guess what happened in 538 BC? Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, they got to go home.

Third Isaiah takes a turn in chapters 56-66 and that was all about the people rebuilding and resettling their homeland which still involved some warnings but there was a lot of encouragement too. Put them all together, and you get the “Isaiah Tradition,” or what we just call the Book of Isaiah. That Isaiah tradition became so important to later generations that Jesus and his early followers quoted Isaiah more than any other book in the Old Testament. Then when you take Isaiah and

add some of the other prophets like Malachi, Joel, Ezekiel, and Daniel into the mix, you get a vision of hope that became the foundation of the church's observance of Advent.

In the time between the prophets and the birth of Jesus, the dreams of a Messiah who would restore God's reign never died, but they weren't completely fulfilled either. Sure, the circumstances changed for the better while they were under Persian rule, but things still weren't as good as the prophets promised. Then when the Greek and Seleucid empires were in control of the region, things were good for a time. The Jews could honestly say that they weren't under oppression. Then when the Romans took control, things fell apart and soon the Jews found themselves back under a humiliating oppression. And the humiliation was even worse because the Romans set up a series of corrupt puppet kings who they thought would keep the Jews in line, but it only made things worse.

And yet ... and yet ... although their hopes were tested, they remained. And their dream lived on. It remained alive for many, including Joseph, Mary, and the humble folks who lived at the margins of society. Small wonder that Jesus, the long expected Messiah, would be born in these margins.

To be alive in Jesus is to have a desire, a dream, and a hope for the future. To be alive in Jesus translates hope for the future into action in the present and to keep acting on it no matter what sort of disappointments, setbacks, or delays we might experience. So let's begin this Advent season by remembering the prophets who proclaimed their hopes, desires, and dreams. Come, thou long expected Jesus.