

Hope that Walks:

An Interpretation of Isaiah for Advent Preachers

Christine Roy Yoder
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

In the season of Advent, Christians wait. We wait to remember and celebrate the child born in a manger long ago, and we wait expectantly for the Son of God to return at the end of time. We wait and we watch, reminded by the texts of Advent that we live sometime “in between” the coming of God into history and God’s final return, between the “good news of a great joy...born this day in the city of David” (Luke 2:10-11) and “that day or hour that no one knows” (Mark 13:32). Caught in the tension between the already and the “not yet,” we are called to watch, to keep alert. And wait.

As we wait and watch, the prophet Isaiah, whose oracles dominate the Advent Old Testament lectionary, rekindles our hope in the “not yet” and reminds us that embracing that hope has implications for our lives now. Pointing us ahead to a towering mountain, to a solitary shoot from a stump, to the cries of a newborn named Immanuel, Isaiah captivates our imaginations about the coming of God. He draws us into a world transformed, a future marked by divine justice, restoration of the whole creation, and universal peace. Emboldened by the promises of Yahweh, the prophet invites us to glimpse the destination, then turns and cries out to us: “Walk in the light! Walk in the light of Yahweh *now*.” Isaiah summons us in these days to a new and vibrant hope, a hope on the move, a hope that grabs hold of our lives, gives us momentum and power, and moves us ahead on the journey to God’s future. The prophet reminds us that Advent is as much about *what* we watch for as *how* we wait.

First Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 2:1-5

The season begins with “the word that Isaiah saw,” a portrait of universal justice and peace ushered in by God’s reign over all the earth. The text is centered on a vision of the future (vv. 2-4; paralleled closely in Micah 4:1-3) and framed by a superscription (v.1) and a summons to the house of Jacob to “walk in the light of Yahweh” (v. 5). The first half of the vision describes an unspecified future time (“in the days to come,” v. 2) when the Temple Mount, namely, Mount Zion, will rise above all other mountains and stand as a physical testament to Yahweh’s sovereignty. Towering over the land, God’s dwelling place will be seen by everyone, not just Israel, and “all the nations” and “many peoples” (vv. 2b, 3a, 4a) will pilgrimage to it. Humanity will stream to Zion/Jerusalem, the primal source of water from which streams flow to the rest of the world (cf. Ezek 47:1-12; Zech 14:8; Joel 3:18 [Heb. 4:18]). It will be as though “the riverbeds of the world flowing out from Zion have become roads, and Zion’s waters flowing out have been replaced by God-thirsty pilgrims coming in.”¹

The second half of the vision reveals why the nations will come. They will journey to the divine mountain to receive instruction and correction *directly* from God (vv. 3b-4a). There is no indication of a mediator (e.g., prophet, priest, or king; cf. Isa 11:1-9 below); rather, Yahweh alone will teach and judge as sovereign of the world (cf. Ps 94:10). That the people will come suggests they know well the limitations of human knowledge and long instead for instruction from the source of all wisdom. Similarly,

the nations' future obedience to Yahweh as arbiter of their disputes acknowledges the fallibility of human diplomacy. The world will make its way to Zion, therefore, for the wisdom and enduring justice it is unable to establish.

Having been to the mountaintop, the many peoples will act (v. 4b-c). With Yahweh exalted as invincible and eternal sovereign over the world, the war-weary nations will stop stockpiling weapons. Instead, they will initiate extensive programs to disarm, both physically and psychologically. The peoples will transform (literally, crush to pieces) their weapons into agricultural tools, reversing the age-old call to arms: "beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, 'I am a warrior'" (Joel 3:10 [Heb. 4:10]; cf. 1 Sam 13:20). Instruments once *deformed* to make destructive arms will be *reformed* into implements for tilling and keeping the earth. At the same time, the nations will cease military training (v. 4c). The result will be an enduring, worldwide peace in which Yahweh's protection sweeps away the memories of weaponry and strategies of war.

The lectionary reading ends with an appeal to the house of Jacob to walk in the light of Yahweh *now* (v. 5). Whether this is, in fact, the climactic conclusion of the vision (2:1-4) or a call to the community to hear what follows (2:6-4:1) is a matter of debate among interpreters. Understood as the former, it is here that Isaiah makes the vision of the future concrete and immediate for his listeners. With "[w]alk (NRSV "come"), let us *walk* in the light of Lord," Isaiah evokes the language and imagery of the vision. Just as the nations *stream* to Jerusalem (v. 2b), just as the many peoples *walk* and say to each other "*walk*, let us go up," just as the world resolves to *walk* in Yahweh's paths (v. 3a), so Isaiah exhorts his community to put one foot in front of the other *as if that future were now*. Those "who hear this message, says the prophet, ought to be not only talking the talk about peacemaking—but walking the walk as well."² Isaiah refuses to leave the vision a distant abstraction, but calls on Israel as one of the many nations to begin its pilgrimage today.

The summons in v. 5 may, on the other hand, be read as an opening plea for the people to walk in the light rather than continue along the path for which they are judged in 2:6-4:1 (so NRSV). There, the house of Jacob is indicted and convicted for covenantal disobedience (see 3:8, 13-15). The charges center on the nation's "fullness": it is filled with religious accommodation (diviners and soothsayers, cf. Deut. 18:9-14), silver and gold, weapons (horses and chariots), idols, and, as a result, self-regard (2:6b-8, 11). The leaders are corrupt (3:12b) and the poor are oppressed (3:14-15). In short, what seems "full" is, in fact, deteriorating from the inside out. The prophet warns that the day is coming when Yahweh alone will be exalted, when arrogant self-reliance and self-congratulation give way to obedience and humility (2:10-22). Then, and only then, will God elevate Zion as a beacon of equity and justice for the nations (2:2; cf. 4:2-6). "Walk in the light of Yahweh," then, is a wake-up call, an admonition that Israel cannot make the journey to Zion until after "a spirit of judgment and a spirit of burning" blows through it (4:4).

During Advent, we stand with the house of Jacob "in between" the vision to which God calls us and the realities of today (v. 5). It is liminal space and transitional time. In the words of English poet Edmund Waller: "leaving the old, both worlds at once they view, that stand upon the threshold of the new."³ We see the glorious "not yet," a mountain high above a world at peace. That mountain orients us. I remember that as a child growing up on the eastern plains of Colorado, I needed only to look to the

horizon to know where I was. The snowcapped Rocky Mountains designated which direction was west. With the mountains as my compass, I was able to find my way most anywhere. Similarly, Isaiah's mountain gives God's people a sense of direction. It is the geography of God's future, the "word we see," preach, and teach as the reliable hope for a despairing world.

At the same time, poised at the threshold, our feet are heavy with the mud and muck of present circumstances. We cannot move without seeing how we live at odds with God's vision for us: our endless quest for more and better weapons, the perpetuation of hatred and violence, the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor, our "fullness" but insatiable appetite for more. Indeed, that God must come to establish justice and teach us to live wisely indicts us for our failures to do so. Isaiah thus pulls us to our feet and urges us to "walk the walk" lit brightly by Yahweh now.

Second Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 11:1-10

Where we last stood between the vision of God's future and God's denunciation of the present (2:5), this text opens in the forest *after* God levels Jerusalem in judgment. God cuts down its loftiest and tallest trees; God hacks at its thickets with an axe (10:33-34). Stumps dot the landscape. Wood is scattered helter-skelter. It is eerily silent. And then, the wind blows. The smallest hint of new life, a small shoot from a stump, reaches skyward out of the devastation. With a tender branch, the prophet proclaims, God will usher in a future not warranted by the human past. God will breathe hope into the terrain of pain and hopelessness. God will raise up a king from the line of Jesse, father of David (1 Sam 16:1), out of the dispirited Davidic dynasty. As was true for 2:1-5, this vision comes in the context of judgment. Its promise of glorious restoration out of a dark night of defeat unfolds in portraits of the new king (vv. 1-5), of cosmic harmony (vv. 6-9), and of the king as banner-signal to the global community (vv. 10-11).

The opening verses describe the character of the future king and his reign (vv. 1-5). The "spirit of Yahweh" will rest on him, a sign of divine commissioning and empowerment (cf. 1 Sam 16:13-14). Yahweh's spirit will bring, in particular, the gifts of wisdom (wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, the fear of the Lord, v. 2). This extensive list underscores the comprehensive nature of the coming king's leadership. The prophet even repeats the phrase "the fear of the Lord" twice (vv. 2d, 3). The "fear of the Lord," an idiom for religious piety, is commonly used in wisdom literature. According to Prov 1:7, "the fear of the Lord" is the beginning of knowledge; without it, one is forever a fool. Much like Solomon who desired from Yahweh "an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil" (1 Kgs 3:9), the king who comes will be known for his discernment.

Isaiah continues with a sketch of the king's physical features and the garments that he will wear (vv. 3b-5). The king will *embody* justice. He will render judicial decisions equitably, not determining them on the bases of appearances (what his eyes see), hearsay, rumor, or manipulation (what his ears hear, v. 3b). He will give a fair hearing, particularly to the silenced, and will set right the wrongs done to the powerless and marginalized. He will judge the wicked severely; his words will strike with the force of a disciplinary rod and the breath of his lips will wither the guilty (v. 4c-d). Finally, his clothing will be righteousness and faithfulness. Figuratively speaking, the first garment he puts on in the morning and the last he takes off at night is his devotion to Yahweh. In sum, this king uses his power to establish justice for *everyone* and to

zealously constrain those who would oppress, exploit, or otherwise abuse others.

The transition in v. 6 is abrupt. Description of the coming king and his reign unexpectedly gives way to a vision of cosmic peace. The focus shifts to a world in which long-standing antagonisms have ceased to exist. No longer do the strong devour the weak, the larger consume the smaller. Instead, predators coexist peacefully with their prey: wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, lion and calf, bear and calf, lion and ox, asp and infant, adder and child (vv. 6-8). Hostility and violence, predilections to “hurt and destroy” (v. 9a), are replaced with “living,” “lying down together,” “grazing,” “eating,” and “playing.” The scene is one of harmonious relationships, perpetual enemies sharing simple, everyday joys. Moreover, the leader of this new world is from among the most vulnerable and innocent—an unnamed little child. The relationship between the depiction of the king (vv. 1-5) and this vision is, arguably, that of cause and effect. That is, the future king’s establishment of justice in the human realm will have rippling (indeed, *righting*) effects on the whole created order. His restoration of human community will bring about the restoration of creation.⁴ The earth will be *full* of the knowledge of God, a radically different fullness than that for which Judah is judged in 2:6-4:1 (see above).

The oracle concludes with a vision of the king (not Zion as in 2:2-4) standing as a signal to the remnant of Israel and to the entire international community (vv. 10-11). The flag that God once raised to summon Assyria to carry out judgment against Israel (5:26) passes now to the shoot from the stump of Jesse. The messianic king and his dwelling place, the land of Israel, command global attention. And the nations come. The Jews scattered throughout the diaspora come. The world makes its way to Zion.

This vision places Christians firmly in the Advent tension between the already and the “not yet.” On the one hand, we readily and joyfully identify this king with Jesus who embodied among us just such a paradigm of leadership. On the other, we are reminded daily by the media and our experiences that the full expression of Isaiah’s vision is as yet unrealized. Advent proclaims the reality of that tension. It celebrates our foretaste of the spirit-led king in Jesus and points us onward to his coming in full glory. By doing so, it rejects any understanding of hope that is less than fully confident in God’s power to completely transform the world.

This oracle offers us two challenges during our Advent waiting. First, it calls us to watch for the Spirit dancing over tree stumps. It summons us to be ready for the power of God to work something new when we, as communities or individuals, see no possibilities. It reminds us that what we may deem lifeless, God uses as fertile ground for new life. Second, with the future king as our beacon, the oracle calls us to embody a particular form of leadership, one characterized by wisdom, manifest in decisions and actions for justice and peace for *all* persons, and clothed in devotion to God.

Third Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah now announces joyfully that the coming reign of Yahweh will completely transform a desolate creation and a despairing human condition. He begins with God’s rehabilitation of the land. The snapshot *before* is of a wilderness, dry land, and desert. Reminiscent of the stump (Isa 11:1), it is the epitome of desolation, barrenness, and inhospitality. The snapshot *after*, however, is awash with the colors of Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon, regions renowned as fruitful. Lebanon, for example, was known in ancient times for its cedar (e.g., Isa 2:13; Ps 29:5), fragrant forests of pine, fir, and

cypress (Isa 60:13; Hos. 14:5; Song 3:9; 4:11), wine (Hos 14:7), and agricultural abundance (Ps 72:16). Similarly, Sharon was celebrated for its flowers (Song 2:1) and fertile pastures (1 Chron 27:29; Isa 65:10). What is now lifeless, Isaiah proclaims, will burst forth with such bountiful life that the earth itself will be heard rejoicing and singing! This (re-)enlivened glory and majesty of the land will be vibrant witness to the glory and majesty of God; by this, the people will see and know that Yahweh is in control (cf. Isa 29:17; 32:15).

With vv. 3-4, the prophet suddenly shifts to present tense plural imperatives: “strengthen,” “make firm,” “say.” He commands the listeners (the community? messengers?) to begin preparations *now* for Yahweh’s imminent reign. The work to be done is specific. The people are to strengthen the feeble and to proclaim the coming of God to the despairing (see “slack hands” as an idiom for discouragement, 2 Sam 17:2; cf. Job 4:3) and the fearful. They are to encourage, to console with boldness: “be strong, do not fear (because) here is your God!” Isaiah twice repeats the phrase *God will come* in his instructions for what they should say; Yahweh will come to vindicate—to right wrongs and reestablish justice—and to set free the people of God. The prophet thus charges his listeners, then and now, with *ministering* and *preaching the gospel*.

Isaiah continues with an account of Yahweh’s governance that interweaves the restoration of humanity with transformation of the environment (vv. 5-7). Images of blind eyes opening and deaf ears being unstopped, language that may be understood both literally (e.g., 42:7, 16) and metaphorically (e.g., Isa 6:9-10; 29:9-10), blend into depictions of the lame *leaping like deer* and the speechless, like the revived land, singing for joy (v. 6a, cf. v. 2a). This imagery is, in turn, washed away by a torrent of phrases announcing the complete transformation of the earth: what is now desert, burning sand, thirsty ground, will break open and flood with life-giving waters. Isaiah’s point is masterfully made: God’s reign restores the whole creation *at once* to health and vitality. God’s care for humanity is woven inextricably with God’s provision for the natural world.

The prophet ends with the climactic vision of a highway in the wilderness, a Holy Way, on which the people of God will journey safely home to Zion. It is a scene that can evoke memories of the Exodus, of a newly liberated people making their way to a promised land through desert wastes where waters surge forth from rock (Exod 17:1-7; Pss 78:15-20; 114:8). On this new road, the people of God—those redeemed and ransomed, wise and cleansed—make their way without threat of harm or wandering astray. They *walk without fear*, joining their voices with the whole of creation in a crescendo of joy (v. 10, see vv. 2, 6).

The vision declares that God’s reign will transform a world of limitation and leanness into one of possibilities and wholeness. Christians during Advent rejoice that this restoration is at hand. We affirm that God, in Jesus, entered the world in human weakness and fragility, but also in power and mystery. We profess that God walked among us, knew firsthand the human struggle, healed the sick, sat at table with the marginalized, and shattered the vise of sin and death. We testify that Jesus is this “one to come” because “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt 11:3-5). We believe that in Jesus Christ the consummation of God’s work has burst into the world and is wondrously unfolding in and around us.

The scope and completeness of Isaiah's vision challenges us to persevere in a hope of cosmic scale. He calls us to trust in God's power to transform a creation that groans in its brokenness, to prepare for a new journey, to shout with confidence *God comes* as we help each other to our feet, and to watch eagerly for that unknown time when God will lay down a highway to Zion and call the world home.

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 7:10-17

The season ends with an encounter between prophet and king. It is a time (c. 735 BCE) steeped in international tension. The Assyrian Empire looms ominously on the horizon, while, closer to home, the Northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) and neighboring Syria (Aram) form a coalition to rebel against it. The Southern kingdom of Judah, led by King Ahaz, refuses to join them, prompting kings Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel to march their armies against Jerusalem (Isa 7:1). Their plan is to conquer the city, depose Ahaz, and install a king ("the son of Tabeel") who will take part in their revolt (v. 6). Ahaz is terrified by the coalition's advance. His heart shakes "as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (v. 2) and, in his panic, he hastily sends tribute and an urgent appeal for help to the Assyrian emperor, Tiglath-pileser III (see 2 Kgs 16:7-9). At some point during these events, Yahweh sends Isaiah to Ahaz (Isa 7:3-9). Urging the king *not* to fear ("take heed, be quiet, do not fear," v. 4), the prophet assures Ahaz that the coalition will fail of its own accord (7:7). Ahaz need only have courage, be patient, and trust in Yahweh's assurance and the protection long ago promised to his family and people. However, if Ahaz persists in acting out of fear instead of faith, the prophet warns, his reign will end (v. 9c).

The lectionary reading begins at this point in the story. Yahweh instructs Ahaz to ask for a "sign," a visible, concrete confirmation of the divine word. Ahaz refuses, claiming that to do so would be profane (see Deut. 6:16)! The irony is not lost on Isaiah. The prophet rebukes Ahaz for hiding his reluctance to know God's intentions behind the façade of piety. Isaiah even distances the king from Yahweh, shifting from language of *your* God (v. 10) to *my* God (v. 13). Then, despite the king's reticence, Isaiah delivers the sign: (1) the young woman,⁵ likely someone known to both Ahaz and Isaiah (a wife or consort of Ahaz? Isaiah's wife?), has conceived and will bear a child; (2) she will name him Immanuel ("God is with us"), an affirmation of divine presence; and (3) the child's age will mark the time of the demise of the northern threat. Before he is able to distinguish between right and wrong (perhaps around two or three years of age), the coalition will collapse. Yahweh's threefold sign is assurance that all will be well very soon.

The lectionary ends there, but the prophecy does not. What appears good news for Ahaz and Judah takes a dramatic turn at v. 17. When Ahaz refused the sign, maybe shaking his head or with a dismissive wave with his hand, he signaled that his hope lay elsewhere. He has other plans. We do not know whether Ahaz appeals to Tiglath-pileser before or after his encounter with Isaiah, but when he does, he pledges full loyalty: "*I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me...*" (2 Kgs 16:7). Invoking the language of "servant" and "son" typically used for the relationship between the king and Yahweh (e.g., 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:26), Ahaz entrusts the future of Judah and the Davidic throne to the Assyrian emperor. Moreover, he sends along silver and gold stripped from the Jerusalem temple as a bribe (2 Kgs 16:8)! Ahaz pins his hope not on Yahweh, but on a worldly empire. "Stand firm in faith" could not be

further from the king's fear-driven intentions. So, as prophesied, he will not stand at all. Breaking off in mid-sentence, Isaiah declares that Ahaz will fall not to the northern coalition, but *to Assyria itself*. The empire to which the king now turns will one day destroy him.

At the heart of the encounter between the prophet and king is an invitation. Isaiah invites Ahaz to look at the world differently: where the king sees intimidating adversaries, Isaiah sees "two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (v. 4); what the king regards as certain defeat, Isaiah declares "shall not come to pass" (v. 7). Isaiah charges Ahaz to look at the world and see God's control of its future, to look at a newborn and *see God-is-with-us*. Should Ahaz accept, his faith in Yahweh is the ground on which he stands when he makes everyday decisions, including the most politically volatile. Should the king refuse, however, his captivity to fear precludes a future.

During Advent, Ahaz reminds us that waiting can be a precarious time. He stands face-to-face with the prophet and his son Shear-yashub ("a remnant shall return"), a child whose very presence signals Yahweh's control of the future. He is given the divine word and a sign, assurance that the threat will soon end. And yet, the king cannot escape his fear. His is a time of crisis, a season during which he finds it most difficult to hope. In his anxiety, he looks around for another means of security, a way to ensure the future. Frightened, he abandons his trust in Yahweh for the long-term, opting for short-term hope in that which will one day defeat him. The king's palpable angst and foolish decision caution us in these days. Waiting in "in between" time is not easy. Insecurities and fear can loom large and take hold of our choices. We may put our faith more in systems, peoples, institutions, ideologies, and our own strategies to "get ahead" than in God's ultimate weaving of history. We may refuse to see the signs in our own time. And we may, of course, discover we really have no hope at all.

Conclusion

The lectionary texts from Isaiah this Advent proclaim the wondrous "not yet" for which we watch and the illuminating power that future has on our waiting now. The prophet summons us to a new and vibrant hope, one that is grounded in God's promises, wisdom, and justice, and that rises high as a mountain above the landscape of human struggle and despair. He calls us to a hope that feels the wind and sees fresh possibilities in a forest of smoldering stumps. He summons us to a hope that is preached (*God comes!*) and a hope that daily "walks the walk" of peacemaking, wise leadership, justice for all people, and the nurture of one another. This Advent, Isaiah offers nothing less than God's gift of a *reliable* hope that will stir and sustain the human spirit long after holiday trappings are stored away.

Notes

¹ D. Carr, "Light in the Darkness: Rediscovering Advent Hope in the Lectionary Texts from Isaiah," *Quarterly Review* (Fall 1995): 298.

² J. Limburg, "Swords to Plowshares: Text and Contexts," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. C. C. Broyles and C. A. Evans. VTSupp 70. Vol. 1. (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 283.

³ Edmund Waller (1606-1687) from "On the Foregoing Divine Poems."

⁴ See W. Brueggemann, "Peacemaking: An Evangelical Possibility," *Church and Society* (Sept./Oct. 1990): esp. 15-18; and idem, *Isaiah 1-39*, Westminster Bible Companion, ed. P. D. Miller and D. L.

Bartlett (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 101-104.

⁵ The Hebrew term “young woman” does not specify whether the woman is a virgin or not (cf. Gen 24:43; Exod 2:8; Song 1:3; 6:8; Prov 30:19). Christian readings of the term as “virgin” and, by extension the traditional interpretation of it as a reference to Mary (see Matt 1:23), are based on the Septuagint and Vulgate translations.