

Isaiah 9:1-7

Today is the last Sunday in Ordinary Time; Advent begins next Sunday. Today is Christ the King Sunday. I did not know until very recently that Christ the King Sunday was added to the liturgical calendar in 1925, as nationalism and fascism were increasing around the world. Now it makes sense to me: in the face of growing autocracy, the church reminded its members quietly that we answer to a higher power than any strongman. *Christ is the King.*

This passage from Isaiah, in Christian eyes, is a proclamation of the kingship of the baby to be born to Mary and Joseph. And that is completely legitimate, and I will use it as such. But I will also remind everyone that it had meaning before there was Christianity, and those only make it richer. The exact historical circumstances are hard to pin down, but it arises either during or right after a crisis during which Israel, the northern kingdom, has fallen to Assyria; and Judah, the southern kingdom, has vacillated between thinking they should make an alliance with someone more powerful in order to resist Assyria, or thinking they should rely on God to preserve them. This may be a coronation hymn for the new king Hezekiah, or it may be a hymn celebrating the birth of a royal baby who will someday be Hezekiah. We just don't know. But it's clear that the people have been through a searing ordeal and feel very vulnerable.

So the prophet praises God for what he is absolutely sure God is going to do—so sure that he speaks of God's actions in the past tense. It's like what Mary does in the Magnificat, when she says God "has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." He is articulating a vision for the exhausted and traumatized, of what life could look like on the other side of the ordeal. They will go from darkness to light; they will increase in number; they will rejoice the way you do at the end of the growing season when your crops have actually

survived and borne fruit and you know you're going to make it through the winter. Here's what I love, and I think it is very very deliberate: "For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken **as on the day of Midian.**" What is this day of Midian? I hear you ask. I will tell you.

Judges 6:1 tells us that the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian. So that was bad. After a time of suffering, an angel appeared to a farmer named Gideon to tell him that he should "go in this might of yours" and deliver Israel from Midian. Gideon responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." And of course the angel said, Just go do it, and Gideon sent out messengers and assembled an army. (I am leaving out a lot of very fun details for the sake of brevity.) Once Gideon has his army, God tells him that it is too big, and the people are going to think they won because of their numbers instead of because God was with them, so Gideon has to pare down the army. He cuts out everyone who looks afraid, but it's still too many, so God tells him to take the army down to a creek and tell them to drink. Some of them will lap up the water like dogs and others will cup their hands to lift the water to their mouths. Gideon should keep only the lappers, which turns out to be 300 troops. With those 300 men, Gideon sneaks up on the Midianites' camp at night, whips out a bunch of lighted torches, and blows a bunch of trumpets, panicking the Midianites so that they run away, chased by the men of Naphtali and Asher and all Manasseh, a humiliating rout.

Isaiah is reminding his audience that the yoke of their oppressor has been broken even though they themselves are very weak. By the grace of God, Gideon prevailed over the Midianites with only 300 men, and the relief/flourishing of Judah will be the same. The boots

of tramping warriors and garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire, because now we have our champion: a baby has been born for us. Our hope rests in someone vulnerable and unproven, but it is not the first time: remember the day of Midian.

This is a glorious vision of hope and possibility—great light, exulting, a child who embodies potential. But it is not the Peaceable Kingdom. The world is still a dangerous place, and threats must be dealt with. It's just that the way God intends to deal with the threats is with this tiny child.

I resist moving too fast to Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision, because I think just culturally we've internalized Martin Luther's message of justification so thoroughly that we see Jesus as the deliverer from sin, and we sort of move from "the world is dangerous" to "but Jesus saves" without stopping to ask what *else* about Jesus might be relevant to our predicament. That's why I'm intrigued by the Gideon-Midian story today. Gideon *did* pare down his army until it was ridiculously small and vulnerable. But he did not then withdraw them to a safe place until God routed the Midianites for them. He took his ridiculously small army to the Midianites and engaged them. Is Isaiah suggesting to his people, and us, that the way to make real the kingdom of God is to do it while small and weak and buttressed only with the presence of a small child?

When we feel weak, we naturally tend to withdraw from engagement because we know we'll get wiped out. But that's not what God told Gideon to do. God told Gideon to go forward *with* his pathetic little army, and they routed the Midianites without ever drawing their swords. So what would engagement look like as we seek to turn away the dehumanizing forces of corruption and polarization? There are plenty of people taking it head on, like the ACLU, and

we should definitely participate in those kinds of efforts that really do require money and critical mass. But that is not enough. We also need to capitalize on our weakness.

I showed my World Religions class a documentary about an armed conflict at the Sikh holy site, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, in 1984.ⁱ It's a beautifully done story, told by an English Sikh journalist who has an emotional attachment to the Golden Temple *and* a journalist's ability to ask hard questions of everyone around. What had happened, briefly, was that an extremely zealous Sikh preacher who had been provoking the Indian government took up residence in the Golden Temple, ostensibly to be closer to the scriptures. The Indian government feared that he was escalating tensions, and decided to flush him and his men out. They came in with tanks, damaging the exquisite materials of the temple, and a number of innocent worshipers were killed and injured. Riots erupted across northern India, with Hindus pitted against Sikhs.

This kind of thing doesn't happen in a vacuum. There was history there, which is why the riots took off so fast, over such a wide area. People who had their own grievances saw this as an egregious violation by the other side, and saw the riots as permission to act out. The journalist in this documentary interviews a Hindu photographer who was appalled at the violence. He had risked his life to shelter a Sikh man, hiding him in his darkroom for two days and a night. The journalist asks him how he feels about what he did, and he says, "I am proud. Because I saved a life."

It's a moving moment, and the camera dwells on it, as the Sikh journalist hugs the Hindu photographer. He was powerless to stop the riots, but he saved one life at risk to his own. He rose above ethnic divisions and skepticism about the "other." He claimed the power he did

have, and his action is inspirational beyond its quantitative value. It reminds us of what decency and humanity mean in the face of overwhelming force. I think of it in connection with the Isaiah passage because this man of very limited power did not withdraw from the conflict, but walked into it, engaged it, and with his limited power dared to save a life. Isaiah's expectations are grand, *and* they are invested in frail human beings. When we lean into our frailty, we are still claiming the vision and the promise of the kingdom—perhaps even more than if we had the principalities and powers at our disposal.

To hear Isaiah's vision on Christ the King Sunday is to remind us that God is invested in mere human beings. The king we're being given is not very formidable or awesome, at least not in conventional terms. In our human meanness there is great potential for daring and empathetic connection, which maybe are a better foundation for the kingdom than command and control capabilities, not that I don't wish for those too but God seems not to think we need them. We are called to engage with the world's struggle as we are, not as we wish we were, with daring and empathetic connection.

Let us pray: God of light, there can be overwhelming obscurity in this world. But you shine your light and increase joy, and for your brilliance we are grateful. Amen.

ⁱ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teL5_wYGVpc "1984 A Sikh Story"