

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Nativity of the Lord: Proper 1 – Year B

RCL Readings – Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 9:1-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

Seasonal Introduction. It is very tempting to preach on the commercialization or secularization of Christmas, the stress of the holiday, and more. There is a challenge whether we should preach about the holiday itself or delve into the lectionary readings. But we surely do our congregations a great disservice by not preaching and teaching the transforming word of God. Of course, we should always find ways to apply the text to current needs but it is generally preferable to build up our community by allowing the Spirit of God to challenge us and encourage us through the appointed readings.

The texts in Isaiah and Luke are very familiar, and may prompt the question, “What new insight can I add to such well known texts?” We should not be compelled to add a new insight or twist to an old story. Instead, good Biblical preaching reminds people of what we already know yet so often tend to forget or minimize.

Finally, we should keep in mind that preaching alone cannot kindle anew the awe and wonder found in the Nativity, God-with-us story. The liturgy, the music, and the Eucharist are essential in engaging the whole person, along with the preaching of His word—we must invite God to rule in our lives, praise and worship Him, encourage each other, and listen to Him.

Common Theme. These texts can be woven together to emphasize the great joy that can be ours because of the incarnation. But it's not just for you and me: God is acting in and through his Son, the Messiah of Israel, to save the world and bring all nations back into submission to Him. Redemption, which comes from Israel and we have felt, is for the world. Christmas is about God's expanding kingship and our response must be one of joyful gratitude and obedient participation.

Hebraic Context. While many of the modern traditions surrounding Christmas were shaped by a largely European imagination, Christmas is, fundamentally, a Jewish story.¹ In particular, it is a

¹ Creating holidays to commemorate the work that God has done started with the calendar God gave Israel. But the creation of holidays continued whenever God saved or judged His people (*Purim*, Esther 9:20-22; *Rosh haShanah*, Nehemiah 8:2, 9-12; 9th of Av, Lamentations, Zechariah 7:3-5, and Taanit 4:6; and *Hanukkah*, I Maccabees 4:59 and II Maccabees 10:6-8). Jesus also celebrated traditions and holidays that developed through time that weren't in the original commands given to Israel on Mt. Sinai or in the prophets (such as the use of wine during Passover or the feast of Dedication, John 10:22). Feasting in celebration of God's creative and redemptive work is not only a strong Jewish tradition, it is often commanded by God. The giving of gifts is not only seen with the Magi but also for *Purim* and *Rosh haShanah*. The use of hymns to remember or commemorate God's great work can be seen as early as the book of Exodus and Psalms. Other traditions of Christmas developed later in time: a physical manger scene is traditionally attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, used as a teaching aid; candles and lights were a relatively late addition to the Christmas traditions, likely in the late 16th-19th centuries—although the Bible

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Second Temple Period Jewish story with all the elements of that time: righteous people, angels, a miraculous birth, prophecy, shepherds,² a star,³ and Gentiles⁴ paying their homage to the new-born king of the Jews. While these events took place when the land of Israel was under the brutal occupation of Rome—a time when the people of Israel were longing for redemption—Luke chooses to focus his history on the many faithful, *Torah* observant Jews.

Isaiah 9:2-7.

Isaiah 9:6,7

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the *misrah* will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, *Sar* of Peace.

7

Of the increase of his *misrah*
and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom (Is.9:6,7a)

The lectionary pairs this well known prophecy with Luke's nativity story but rarely is it the focus of a Christmas sermon. It often serves a proof text that remains merely a backdrop to the nativity story. Yet a different textual approach to Christmas might be to emphasize the kingship of Jesus (Luke 1:32-33) and the nature of his rule. How a baby born to poor parents, in obscurity at the edge of the Roman Empire can be hailed as the long promised redeemer is at the heart of the incarnation mystery. The Isaiah passage prepares us for Epiphany when Jesus will appear preaching repentance and the arrival of the Kingdom of God/Heaven. Jesus did not simply preach the Good News but he proclaimed the tidings of God's in-breaking Kingdom (Luke 5:43; Matt.9:35).

Although Luke's Gospel does not portray the birth of Jesus as a royal event (as in Matthew, the magi visit the 'King of the Jews') but the promise of kingship is central. "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:32-33; see also 1:68-79). The evangelist connects Jesus and King David (Luke 2:4 &11) and is no doubt informed by the Son of Man

provides many references to light related to the Messiah, salvation, or Jesus Himself; the Christmas tree also developed quite late—during the German reformation (well after the decline of Paganism in Europe)—possibly alongside the traditions of the lighting of candles.

² Ezekiel 34

³ Numbers 24:17

⁴ See footnote 6

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passage in Daniel (7:13-14) and Isaiah (9:2-27). Luke foresees a single ruler, a son of David, reigning eternally.

The promise God made to David, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16) seems to have failed with the division of Israel and its exile. But now it has found fulfillment in the birth of a son who will bring joy to a war ravished land and a humiliated, confused nation. The child foreseen by Isaiah will be an ideal son of David who will not fail as David did. Although these events have yet to come to pass, this passage in Hebrew is in the past tense, a technique not uncommon in recording prophecy because God has already determined it. The child is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God (and more) but these are not proper names, but a description of his government. The Hebrew word used for government in verses 6&7 is *misrah*. It is used today in modern Hebrew but it has lost its deeper biblical meaning better defined as the *power of government* or rulership. It comes from the root *sar* which primarily means prince, ruler, leader or official. In a verbal form *sar* can be translated he ruled or he is ruling. Abraham's wife was changed to *Sarah* denoted her status as a princess and many interpret the name *Israel* to mean *prince* of God.

Isaiah 9:2-7 is not directly quoted in the New Testament but it lurks in the background in Jesus' self-understanding, in his teaching, and in that of his earliest followers. The expanding *misrah* of Jesus was proclaimed in his preaching, illustrated by his parables, and demonstrated by his miracles. Throughout the Synoptic Gospels the Kingdom is a present reality and is central to the message and mission of Jesus. His kingship is established when people submit to him and do his will (Matt.) and it expands as repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, and deliverance occur among his subjects.

Unlike earthly kings and political systems, the increase of His *misrah*, as pointed out by Robert Lindsey, is not that Jesus is acquiring more and more power for himself, but rather that more and more people are coming under His authority. With the increase of his *misrah*, for those allowing Him to work in their lives, comes an increase of peace as these people truly know the things that make for peace (Luke 19:42).

At a time when there is great dissatisfaction with our leaders and political institutions it is essential to remember who is our King and what is the true nature of his *misrah*.

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*Goldingay, John. The Theology of the Book of Isaiah InterVarsity Press.

*Lindsey, Robert. The Expansion of His Kingdom

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Psalm 96.⁵ This psalm is a “new song” of great joy that enjoins the worshiper to celebrate the royal majesty of the God of Israel. What is “new” here? These are familiar phrases that appear throughout the Psalter. But Israel’s God is revealed to be the God over the whole earth, “Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth!”⁶ The whole earth is now commanded to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness—literally, holy adornment.⁷ Holiness is beautiful, but beauty should also be essential in the way that we respond to God’s majesty.

God’s rule over us should, and does, bring indescribable joy as it redeems us and all creation. But His kingship also brings judgment—a judgment based on His own righteousness. The wrong understanding of God, along with twisted worship, brings disastrous consequences when the true God is not acknowledged and there is a lack of gratitude.⁸

Titus 2:11-14. Titus may not be a traditional passage for a Christmas sermon, but Paul reminds us of some very important themes that have run throughout Scripture and lead us to the role of the Messiah. Following through from Isaiah and Psalm, God’s grace and promise of salvation (2:11) is for the entire world. God’s salvation has two visible forms in Paul’s letter to Titus.

As we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate Jesus—the Christ. God has come to dwell among His people. Surely Paul, when stating, “His very own people” reflected on Exodus 29:45 and Ezekiel

⁵ Psalm 96 is part of a series of Psalms that share the theme of “The LORD reigns!”. These Psalms, (47, 93, 96-99) were, in part or in full, likely part of a liturgy sung in the Temple that declared God to be King, both in the heavens and also over all the earth and those who live therein.

⁶ The idea of the Gentiles worshiping God is still not new. From the histories (...) to the prophets (Isaiah 42:5-13, Jews and Gentiles were always to ... But Paul still declares that Gentiles as fellow heirs is a mystery that has now been revealed (Eph 3:6). Nonetheless, each time we sing God’s praises, each time we pray to Him, we do so with a new song. Even if we’ve prayed the Lord’s prayer 1,000 times, it is still new each time we pray.

⁷ The phrase can be interpreted as the vestments of the priests and Levites, and is strongly associated with public worship, “And when [Jehoshaphat] had consulted with the people, he appointed those who should sing to the LORD, and who should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army and were saying, ‘Praise the LORD, for His mercy endures forever.’” (II Chronicles:2-:21) See also (I Chronicles 16:29; Psalm 29:2)

⁸ Romans 1:18-32 echoes God’s righteous judgment—God’s decree is righteous, but no less disastrous for those who do not acknowledge God but follow worthless idols.

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37:23, “No longer shall they defile themselves with their idols, their abominations, and all their transgressions. I will deliver them from all their sins of apostasy, and cleanse them so that they may be my people and I may be their God.”

Salvation also takes a visible form when the people of God are purified and eager to do (lit.) good works.⁹ For those who accept the offer, salvation is not an end in itself and should be understood as so much more than disconnected individuals on their way to heaven. Salvation takes corporate form as God's intention from the beginning has been to dwell in the midst of a people. In the words of the late Dwight Pryor, He is a “coming-down” God—passionate in pursuit of a people to bear His name and partner with Him in His redemptive agenda for the earth. When we are willing to be transformed, the Lord himself does the purifying that allows Him to intimately dwell in our midst.

The prayer after communion that is found in many Anglican Advent liturgies is one that should daily be on our lips: *Our Father and King, whose Son was born into the world to free us from sin and death and give us eternal life: purify us by His perfect sacrifice, that, when He comes in power and glory, we may greet Him without shame or fear; through Jesus the Messiah our Lord. Amen.*

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20).¹⁰

Hebraic Perspective.

The Christmas Story

Do we actually take the Incarnation seriously? It has been charged with some justification that in many Protestant traditions the Incarnation is primarily seen as a means to an end – the sacrificial death of Jesus. The Eastern Churches hold the birth of Jesus to be just as important as his death and resurrection and argue that we are not saved by an event (the crucifixion) but by a person – Jesus himself. Such a view understands that through the liturgy and holy days the Christian participates* in the mysteries of the entire life of the Messiah from the Incarnation, nativity, and presentation in the temple, to his baptism and

⁹ If there is some confusion here about the role of grace then the paradigm of the Exodus is helpful. The Hebrews were freed from Egypt because God was faithful to his promises and not for any good deeds that had made them worthy of such a spectacular deliverance. Yet, once liberated, God brought them to Sinai—claiming His rule over them—and commanded them to be holy (Lev. 19:2). The definition of holiness here is not abstract but centers on a lifestyle (v.11) of self control, justice and devotion towards God.

¹⁰ For the enterprising preacher, teacher, or family, the RCL provides three separate lectionary entries to be taught throughout the day—as an example: Christmas Eve, Christmas Morning, and Christmas Evening. The first entry, Proper 1, includes the readings found here: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, (15-20). If you wish to also read Proper 2, you may find it prudent to exclude Luke 2:8-20 from proper 1 as the readings for Proper 2 are: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20. Finally, proper 3 includes: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14 (see Addendum)

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transfiguration, through to his last week in Jerusalem, death, resurrection, and ascension. Theologically this is believed to be possible because the Incarnation not only saves *from* something (sin and death) but saves us *for* something (union with God through Christ). Being united with Christ gives us the privilege of sharing his life. Thus the Christmas focus of Eastern Christianity is not the birth of a baby per se, but the promise of abundant life.

***Footnote:** The concept that we must personally take part in past events is a Jewish one that dates from the late Second Temple Period. It is found in the earliest Passover liturgies when Rabbi Gamaliel states that “In each and every generation a person must view himself as though he personally left Egypt.” In the retelling (liturgy) of the Exodus story time collapses and every Jew must grasp they are participating in the historic life of Israel and act accordingly. This theology finds its way into the New Testament when Paul tells the church in Rome that they have been crucified and risen with Christ (Rom.6).

When preaching the birth narrative from Luke it is helpful to keep in mind his portrait of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah. This theme runs through his gospel from the Roman census and nativity, to the resurrection (vindicating his claim to be the Messiah) and the Ascension (whence he begins his Messianic rule) as recorded in the Book of Acts. “Jesus is from David and will be like David—indeed, greater than David.” Interestingly, Jesus never applies the term “son of David” to himself, preferring instead the “son of man” although others refer to him by this title (Luke 18:36-37).

What is essential in this narrative is the connection with Bethlehem (the city of David) and Joseph who was a descendant of the house of David. Jesus is shown in David's line in Luke's genealogy and not surprisingly he is only king listed. Jesus not only fulfills the promises made to Israel in the Hebrew Bible, his Davidic descent gives a tie to royal significance as he is identified as Son of God (i.e. Baptism and Transfiguration). This follows from the filial relationship between God and David (2 Sam 7:14, Ps 2:7, 89:26-27).

Even a casual reading of Luke 1 & 2 leads one to the conclusion that Jesus' mission was not only centered on the restoration of Israel but ultimately the salvation from Israel to all nations. The move from Israel to the nations is seen in the song of the angels to the shepherds. Although looked down upon in society, they were the very ones serenaded by the angels revealing the mission of the messiah. The song is well known but its meaning is a matter of controversy, Most translation have a two-part translation, “Glory to God in the

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highest, peace on earth toward men of goodwill.” However, Professor David Flusser was convinced that a three-part version (see KJV) makes more sense in light of the Messianic mission of Jesus, Hebrew Bible passages, and also that ancient Jewish blessings are in three parts. “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” This emphasizes the universal meaning of the coming of the Messiah. Goodwill, or God’s favor, is towards all people, not for the select or predestined few as the Qumran sect believed. The former rendition indicates that his coming is reserved for people who are worthy, that is, “men of goodwill.”

Goodwill here is the blessing and divine favor as seen in Deuteronomy 33:23 “satisfied with goodwill/favor” is paralleled by “full with the blessing of the Lord.” Goodwill is a blessing of the Lord. Peace, the Hebrew word *shalom* is more than just an absence of war. It is wholeness, soundness, well-being, health, and safety.

In the words of Brad Young: "The birth of the Messiah means that peace, divine wholeness, is made known to people. God’s merciful will is revealed for all of humanity in the coming of Jesus. His coming was for “all people” as indicated in Luke 2:10. The “goodwill” in the song of the angels refers to God’s divine favor which is being revealed in the birth of Jesus the Messiah. The mission of Jesus resonated with the song of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

Footnote: It is sometimes popularly suggested that the shepherds were tending the sacrificial animals for the temple, but this is not implied in any way by the text."

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Proper 3 Addendum:

John 1:1-14. The Gospel of John opens with a deep dive into contemporary Jewish thought and theology. A fundamental tenet of Judaism, distinct from other religions, asserts the existence of

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only one eternal God. Nonetheless, scholars during the 2nd Temple period discerned indications in the Scriptures suggesting a second authority in heaven. Proverbs 8:22-31 alludes to a pre-creation entity involved in the creative process that also gave life to those that sought [it].¹¹ In Daniel 7:9, heavenly thrones are set down, with the Ancient of Days occupying one. The question arose, why are there multiple thrones? In 7:13-14, one, like the son of man, was given everlasting authority and all people would serve him.^{12 13}

But John 1:1-4 appears to develop most directly out of Isaiah 48:12-16. Isaiah starts his entreaty with the plea to listen—*sh'ma*, linking the hearer of the word to Moses' discourse in Deuteronomy 6:4. The statement is clear, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

Isaiah then introduces a character called the 'first and the last' who fashions the heavens and the earth. Thus, we conclude that the 'First and the Last' is God. Verse 16 continues in which the First and the Last states that, from the beginning of time He was there and now the Lord God sends Him with His Spirit.

Here is the Hebraic tension; we had initially concluded that the 'First and the Last' was God as He was active in creation, yet we find this character being sent by God and thus, surely, cannot 'be' God! Concurrently, we have the concept of the spoken word, *Davar*, used many times throughout Scripture as the divine word of God. Creation came about when God spoke.¹⁴ Hence John's opening of his gospel with 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God and ... through Him all things were made'.

¹¹ If this being was with God daily, rejoiced before him, and helped create the world—having existed itself before creation—some apostate Israelites seemed to have used Proverbs 8 to argue their belief that God had a wife. Arad, a city in southern Israel, had two altars in its temple—for God and His Asherah. This interpretation was rebuked in Ecclesiasticus 24:1-9 when Ben Sirach attempted to clarify the ambiguity of Proverbs 8 by stating plainly that the being is simply wisdom.

¹² Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1, "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" as recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke while Peter also preaches from it in Acts 2. When Jesus returned to heaven, He sat at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19; Hebrews 1:3). Luke 22:69 makes the connection even more clear, "But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." Finally, in Mark 14:62 Jesus insures that no one can mistake his declaration, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

¹³ "Son of man" was the title that Jesus so often gave Himself. It had much stronger ties to the claim of being God, as the theology of Daniel 7:13-14 developed, than the title "son[s] of God"—which was given to angels, Israel, and even foreign nations (Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7; Psalm 29:1, 89:1; Deuteronomy 14:1, Psalm 82:6; Hosea 1:10; as well as Wisdom of Solomon 2:13, 5:5; Luke 3:38; John 1:49, 20:31; Romans 9:26; and Galatians 3:26.) Daniel 7:13 is quoted or alluded to in Matthew 26:64;

¹⁴ Psalm 33:6 is one example where the LXX (Ps 32:6) mentions the *logos* (*davar*) of the Lord in relation to God's creative workings.

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John continues his theological dive into concurrent Jewish discussion in John 1:4-9. [John the Baptist testified concerning the Light](#), a symbol with profound significance in Jewish thought. Unlike our conventional associations, God's light—the first thing spoken into being—wasn't just the sun, in fact, the sun hadn't even been created. In Jewish tradition, the physical light that is produced from the sun, moon or fire is not the same light that is being described or spoken into being by God—the light produced by God at Creation is much different. The first thing that God did with the light was move it—He separated light from darkness. Once light was moved, all that remained was darkness. Note that God does not create darkness, he creates light. Once He moved the light then there was only darkness, but that was not something created by God. God's light has both physical *and* spiritual properties. It can differentiate between good and evil, unlike the sun's indiscriminate illumination. The Dead Sea community uses light and darkness motifs to categorize the world into the sons of light and sons of darkness.¹⁵ Paul also notes this separation in 2 Corinthians 14-17 when he asks rhetorically what fellowship has light with darkness. The prophet Isaiah used this image when he declared that the lands living in darkness would see a great light. Often the psalms pair light and salvation together in revealing that the 'Lord is my light and my salvation' (Psalm 27). John uses the metaphor of light to describe the Messiah, thus introducing Him as Lord and Saviour. John tells us that Yeshua is the light of the World while Psalm 27 equates light with God's salvation.

Optional Content 2.

Further reading.

Sources and Bibliography.

1. Sing to the LORD a new song! In this celebration of God's majesty, it is of course in the interests of the psalm poet to proclaim that this is a fresh and original composition. In point of fact, it is a weaving together of phrases and whole lines that appear elsewhere. Yair Hoffman actually characterizes it as a "mosaic" of lines drawn from familiar psalms. The very familiarity, of course, might have enhanced its accessibility to the Israelite worshipper. 3. the nations.../...all the peoples. The perspective of this poem is decidedly global rather than national. All the inhabitants of earth are enjoined to celebrate God's kingship. 5. For all gods of the peoples are ungod. The previous line, "awesome is He over all the gods," which also has a close parallel in Psalm 95:3, looks as though it is a line inherited from an early stratum of Hebrew poetry. In this case, the psalmist immediately attaches a kind of monotheistic rejoinder to it by asserting that all the other gods have no real existence: "ungods," elilim, is a polemic coinage that appears

¹⁵ It's possible that when Jesus references the 'sons of light' in John 12:36 and in Luke 16:8 He is engaging in a polemic against the Dead Sea community at Qumran. The people at Qumran considered themselves to be the sons of light and refused to associate with others whom they termed the sons of darkness.

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frequently elsewhere, punningly formed on al, (“no,” “not”) and el (“god”), to which a diminutive or pejorative suffix is appended. The standard meaning of the term in all subsequent Hebrew is “idols.”

Alter, Robert. The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary (p. 442). W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.

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