

December 24 and 25, Nativity (Isaiah 9:2–7; Luke 2:1–20)

Preachers who value their pulpit would be wise to avoid Isaiah 9 this Christmas Eve.

by [Daniel Schultz](#) in the [December 18, 2019](#) issue

God alone knows what American politics will look like on the evening of December 24, 2019. The nation could be elbow deep in impeachment proceedings, or maybe the hearings will have come and gone. Perhaps there will be some entirely new horror to wrestle with.

Whatever happens, congregations will not want to hear a word about it. They'll come to light candles and sing "Silent Night"—nothing more, nothing less. Exegetical preachers who value their pulpit would therefore be wise to avoid Isaiah 9:2–7 this Christmas Eve. Better known from Handel's *Messiah* than from any sermon, the text arrives stinking of politics and sulfur.

It opens with a proclamation of darkness: not the coziness of a midwinter evening but the bottomless despair of Psalm 23:4, in which the same word describes the "valley of the shadow of death." Isaiah has just spoken of the fall of Zebulun and Naphtali to the Assyrian Empire, presumably including the massacres that typically followed military defeat in those days. Decades later, the southern kingdom of Judah will be decimated by the empire, but already Israel is gone, and the specter of Babylon hangs over even the most confident of Isaiah's promises.

Confident they are. The prophet announces that, thanks to the Lord, the state of the kingdom is good. Babies are being born, consumer satisfaction is up, and the people are as happy as they would be with bumper crops and the spoils of a good hunt ("dividing plunder," v. 3). Even better, the Lord has lifted burdens and driven away oppressors in the same way as with Gideon's defeat of the Midianites. The boots and clothes of Judah's enemies will be covered in blood, good only for feeding the fire. This is "Joy to the World" with brass knuckles.

It may feel like a relief to see the passage shift back to familiar ground. “A child has been born for us,” Isaiah declares, “a son given for us.” But even cursory investigation reveals a cold comfort. Scholars argue whether these verses are a birth announcement or are pinched from a coronation liturgy. Isaiah three times uses the figure of a child: born of a virgin in 7:10–17, exalted here, and declared a wise descendent of Jesse and a peacemaker in 11:1–10. On the other hand, “son of God” was a common figure applied to kings on their ascension to the throne, and the titles Isaiah bestows—“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”—strikingly resemble those given to Egyptian monarchs.

In a sense, it makes no difference if the king is newly born or newly crowned. This is a text about politics. Specifically, it is a bit of nationalistic puffery about how Israel’s military defeat and political domination will be reversed, through the power and might of a God of armies (“hosts”) who intervenes very much by this-worldly means. It is like a modern-day preacher praying that the president of the United States would defeat, with God’s assistance, all the godless heathen rabble threatening America. It is only by spiritualized legerdemain that Christians could appropriate Isaiah’s partisan message as an anticipation of Jesus’ coming as an infant “so tender and mild.” It takes real work to knot such a text into a Christocentric pretzel.

There is value in a historical reading of Isaiah, even on Christmas Eve. Luke’s angelic announcement that “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior” echoes the prophet just enough to make an instructive parallel. Like Isaiah’s king figure, this infant is born into an unstable political situation that will soon enough run to blood. It’s not for nothing that Simeon warns Mary that a sword will pierce her heart. Violence funded by a strongman’s lust for power is a common thread, running from Isaiah’s day to Luke’s to our own.

Without naming the darkness for what it is, the people of God have no way to understand the light that shines upon them. Scripture is often alarmingly silent on some aspects of human suffering, and yet just as startlingly knowing about complex geopolitics, political rivalries, and corruption. It names all of these as more evil than ordinary suffering—because they involve choice. There’s only so much that can be done about cancer, but forming an ill-advised alliance against the Assyrian Empire is completely in the realm of human decision. God knows when people have options and when they don’t, and weighs the fault accordingly.

Congregants crowded into uncomfortable pews next to their grandchildren will most likely not take an interest in being reminded of what Walter Brueggemann calls the “inscrutable darkness” that rules so much of their newspaper headlines. But a responsible preacher will nonetheless find a way to remind them of the valley of the shadow of death that lingers nearby, even during our most joyous holidays.

A Talmudic commentary on the world to come interprets this passage as follows:

The morning cometh, but previously will be a long, long night. If, however, ye desire to pray that [the Lord] shall hasten it, try to do so by repenting of your sins, and coming again prepared for redemption.

A light has shined on us, no less than on Isaiah’s people. This passage forces the question of how ready we will be when the darkness finally lifts and the daystar rises. That question, like the text itself, has disturbing political complications lurking in the background. Nimble preachers can lay out the entire uncomfortable truth successfully. But only with a mature audience, and only after the children’s pageant is done.