**TO US A CHILD IS BORN**

December 22, 2013

Isaiah 8:11-9:7

Key Verse 9:6 “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Today we want to think about Jesus’ birth, foretold in Isaiah 9:6. It says, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” That gives us the story of the arrival of Jesus from both heaven and earth’s perspective. “To us a child is born” is the story of a birth. “To us a son is given” is the story of a departure from heaven. From heaven’s perspective, the son left glory and came to walk among us and breathe our air and live our life and then die our death. From earth’s perspective, God came to us as a man who was deity in diapers--God almighty as a little, helpless baby. Let’s think about Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.

First, some background of this passage. Isaiah lived in dark and dangerous times. People were fearful of Assyrian invasion. In 8:7-10, Assyria is pictured as a floodwater covering the land of Judah up to the neck. You have seen pictures of the devastation of floods that can swallow whole houses. Imagine clinging to the roof of the house and the water reaching to your neck. Does this sound familiar? We also live in dark and uncertain times. Many people worry about their jobs and economy. Students worry about their marks and uncertain future. So people are fearful, just like in Isaiah’s day. Fear is the tool of Satan. With fear he destroys men’s faith, because it is impossible to live by faith when we are consumed by fear. The basic root of fear is Death. Men fear death, other fears come from this. They feel unease at their sinful lives because of an intuition of the judgment after death. They fear losing the small things they have because they have a hope in a world that is dying. In verses 8:12b-14a God encouraged Isaiah, “do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary.”

When their lives were in danger, did they turn back to God and repent? That was God’s hope in sending trouble, but for these stubborn people, they did not repent. Look at 8:14-15. “And he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured.” A rock can be a sanctuary. David says, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress.” We can picture a cleft in the rock which provides shelter and sanctuary. But a rock can also be an obstacle. We can trip over a rock. God wished to be their sanctuary, but instead God became their stumbling stone due to their unbelief. Romans 9:33 says that Jesus is this stumbling stone, but those who trust in him will never be put to shame.

In last week’s Christmas message, we heard that Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a cold manger. If Joseph had the pomp of the king of Assyria, they would welcome him, and rejoice that he visited their inn. People despise the little, gentle things, like the humble baby Jesus. Later when Jesus preached, the people rejected him as the Messiah, because he was too gentle and meek. I like C.S. Lewis’ words, “To love is to be vulnerable.” Jesus loved us so much that he made himself vulnerable as a baby in the manger. But people reject God’s way as too gentle, too small, too slow. And they do it their own way.

Look at verse 8:11. “The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people…do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.’” In fact, without God’s strong hand upon, how can we resist the evils of this dark world! Pray for God’s strength in temptation. And Isaiah answered in verses 17-18. “I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him. Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.” It means Isaiah’s whole family would stand against the times. It means that he instructed his children to follow his example. His wife was a prophetess (8:3), and from birth, their children were signs; from their youth, they participated in his ministry.

We see in 7:3 and 8:3 that their names were “Shear-Jashub” meaning a remnant will return, and “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz,” “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” Their names were signs, their very names preached the messages of the return of a remnant of Israel, and the coming of Assyria. We can wonder what it would be like going to school with the name “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.” Probably he hated his name and asked his father to change his name. But through this training the young boy could think about how his very life was a message to the people. In fact in 7:3 God told Isaiah to take his other son Shear-Jashub with him when he preached to the king. The children grew up in the ministry. Some Christians believe that what God wants most for us is to have a happy family. But what God wants most for our families is to be witnesses and our homes to be house churches. That is why we pray earnestly to raise 10,000 house churches.

Look at 8:21-22. “Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.” People without God are described as distressed and hungry and roaming the land with no direction and no hope. They are getting worse and worse. What is this hunger? It is hunger for purpose and meaning, which they try to find in all the wrong places. God is pouring distress into their hearts and fueling the hunger to lead them to repent. People who look for hope in this world, hoping in science or in the good of humanity will be distressed and disappointed. They are on the path to utter darkness, which is hell, and they are already tasting the darkness that will be their eternal lot. At the same time, people try to make Christmas about something else: a celebration of family, or of myths about Santa Claus, or of materialism. And so Christmas time is the time when the most Canadians suffer from depression, because they do not have the light of dawn.

But God wants to bring men out of their darkness. Look at Isaiah 9:1-2. “Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress…The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” This great light is Jesus. He proclaimed in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” The coming of Jesus is pictured like the coming of dawn. People are stumbling around in the dark. Then the sun rises and all of the land is full of light. Jesus is the rising sun.

All Christians should have their testimony of how the light of Jesus shone in the darkness of their sins. Recall 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” The second half of this verse is not as famous as the first half. You were chosen for a purpose: “that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Do you only see distress and gloom? Then take your eyes off the earth and look upward. Ask God for the light of dawn to shine in your heart. You can be sure that God does not want men to remain in the agony of death and darkness. He sent his son into the world to bring light to people in darkness. If in Genesis chapter 1, he did not leave world formless and empty and dark, then he does not want to leave you dark and empty. Rather, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Humbly ask God for the peace that the little baby in a manger brings.

Let’s read the key verse, Isaiah 9:6. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah begins by marveling at how the Christ comes as a baby, and yet is God. It is the same mystery as 7:14 “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” The birth of God-with-us (Immanuel) is a divine mystery. It is good news of great joy for all the people. The Almighty God came as a tender little baby. This poetic expression of divine love and grace is the heart of Christmas. Even seeing it far in the future, Isaiah marveled at the birth of the Son of God by a virgin.

Let us look at each of these 4 titles. First, he is the Wonderful Counselor. We need a Wonderful Counselor. There are so many decisions to make in life. Little decisions like whether to sleep or to pray. Big decisions like what to study, who to marry, what job to take, whether to go out as a missionary. How can we find the answers to life’s questions? We need guidance. God has provided a Wonderful Counselor in Christ Jesus. The second title is, “Mighty God.” The child that is born is God. God has come to be with men. In Jesus we find our true God to worship, as did the Magi, and the man born blind. We need to know the mightiness of God. Isaiah 40:28-31 proclaims: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

The third title is Everlasting Father. Jesus relates to human beings as a father relates to his children. Jesus is not an impersonal force, but a personal and loving Father to his people. A father is very important to his children. A father protects, provides for and disciplines his children. Under a good father, children grow strong and live fruitful lives. Without a father, children can become weak or crooked. Because human fathers are sinners, they fail in many ways. They can be foolish, lazy, selfish, or even violent. Children suffer too much because of this. To them, the word “father” evokes disappointment and pain. Tragically, they think the same way about their heavenly Father. But our heavenly Father is different. We can see the heart of God in the father of the prodigal son (Lk 15). When his children go astray, he waits for them, looking every day for their return. When his children come back, all dirty and smelly after committing many sins, he runs to them with open arms and embraces them. He forgives our sins, clothes us with true righteousness, and bestows on us holy dignity. We all need an everlasting father. Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Jesus is Everlasting Father for them, and for all people.

The fourth title of Jesus is Prince of Peace. We recall the angels’ message at his birth, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Lk 2:24). The peaceful baby lying in a manger is the sign of God’s desire to bring peace to men. Jesus offers us peace in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” We live in a restless world where men long for peace. They try to soothe their anxiety with movies or sleeping or drinking. But they are only filled with distress and fearful gloom. This is because they do not have peace with God. Romans 5:10 teaches that sinful man is at war with God, but Christ has reconciled us with the Father through his death in our place. Without his sacrifice, we can never have peace, but only wander aimlessly. Now look at verse 7. “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” Jesus’ kingdom is forever. All other governments have been temporary. In the end, they fell due to injustice and corruption. But Jesus’ kingdom is established on justice and righteousness. These solid pillars are the foundation for peace and prosperity that never ends. How is it possible? “The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this” (7b).

What a precious gift God has given us in his Son Jesus Christ: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Let’s accept this gift so that we may have true joy, peace and victory at this Christmas.