

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
December 19, 2010

The Mission of the Servant

Isaiah 9:7; 11:1-9

Key verse: “Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins” (Isaiah 11:5).

In an article for *Christianity Today* magazine, Leigh Bishop tells about a recent Christmas Eve that he spent at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan. At dusk, Leigh watched a line of military vehicles approach the airfield. The vehicles stopped and then unloaded a flag-draped steel casket. Leigh knew that, back in the U.S., some family would experience its worst Christmas ever.

That same Christmas Eve, Leigh witnessed a very different scene: [After watching the casket be unloaded from the military vehicle], “I find myself walking along...the main avenue of Bagram Airfield. All is different... Soldiers holding candles are belting out Christmas carols with gusto. Down the street, luminaries brighten the walkway into the clamshell-shaped auditorium, where cheerful groups of uniformed men and women enter for a Christmas concert. Two blocks away, the chapel is filling for the six o’clock Christmas Eve service.”

Those contrasting scenes describe for me the fact that we live today in the time between the times—between Christ’s first coming as a baby in Bethlehem and His promised return to establish God’s eternal kingdom.

Throughout the ages, people have lived with the plagues of war, disease, poverty, and injustice. The Bible tells us that, at the root of all of these plagues, is the curse of sin—and the brokenness sin has brought to our world and to the human race.

Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah, were given a divine glimpse at the coming kingdom age, a time when the Messiah’s reign would bring God’s *shalom*. Our Scripture readings for this week, from Isaiah 9 and 11, give a preview of what the world will be like in that kingdom age:

The Messiah’s rule is to be a period of “endless peace,” “justice,” and “righteousness” (9:7).

The Messiah is to be a descendant of King David (11:1). Isaiah prophesied to a people who were seeing the end of Israel’s monarchy under David, Solomon, and their immediate descendants. Yet, Isaiah foresaw a day when, speaking of the Messiah, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

The Messiah is to be empowered by the Holy Spirit: “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him....” (11:2). When Jesus began His ministry, He stood in the synagogue in Nazareth and proclaimed: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18).

Isaiah offers this beautiful picture of the peace and safety that will characterize the coming kingdom age: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den” (11:6-8).

Parts of Isaiah’s prophecy have been fulfilled. Jesus came, a descendant of David, born in Bethlehem. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ ministry revealed what God’s kingdom is like—the captives released, the blind restored to sight, the oppressed set free. His death and resurrection opened the doors to life abundant and eternal to all who will receive Him as Savior.

Yet, as Christmas 2010 approaches, we still live in a world that is plagued by war, poverty, disease, and injustice. We still live in a world reeling from the brokenness that sin has brought to our world. As followers of Christ, we are called to work for peace, healing, and justice. We are called to witness to others the difference that Jesus can make in our lives now, if we will receive Him into our hearts.

Yet, in all of this, we remember that we are living now “between the times.” In this Advent season, we are reminded that the same Jesus who came as a baby to Bethlehem will come again to establish God’s eternal kingdom. Then the messianic age foreseen by Isaiah will come in fullness.

Our United Methodist *Book of Worship* says it well: “The [Advent] season proclaims the comings of the Christ—whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again, who comes continually in Word and Spirit, and whose return in final victory we anticipate” (page 238).

“Even so, come Lord Jesus!”

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