

Advent Hope

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Preacher: Darren Jackson

[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 11 starting at verse 1. You can find that on page 697 of your church Bibles. That's Isaiah chapter 11 starting at verse 1. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might, the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears, but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples. The nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Thanks very much. So yeah, tonight, because we're in the season of Advent, and if you're confused by the word what Advent means if you aren't in Anglican traditions, it just means coming and arrival. So we look back to Jesus' first coming into history to anticipate the time of year and the season of Christmas, but also to help us always dwell on the reality that he will come again. It's a promise rooted throughout the scriptures that Jesus didn't just come once to do a pile of stuff, then disappear, that he has come, he is living, and he is reigning, and he will come again. And so we're looking at one of a very famous Advent passage, which is Isaiah 11, which we read at this time of year to help us dwell on the reality and nature of who this king is and what he is like. Isaiah, if you've been to any carol services, I'm sure you've heard this verse before, says earlier in chapter 9, for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And because Christians believe this child, who is the messianic king, Isaiah is talking about is Jesus, we're going to look at this passage tonight to reflect on certain aspects and certain realities of who the king is to prepare us as we think about heading into Christmas. But obviously, in the same way lots of adverts say that certain puppies and things aren't just for Christmas, Jesus is not just for Christmas. We take these things into all of life, all the time, all the places we go. So I'm going to pray, and then, is this okay? Is this changing in volume a lot?

Okay. I'm going to pray, and then we'll talk a little bit about Isaiah, and then we're just going to skim, there's so much packed into this passage here. We're going to draw certain aspects and realities and truths of who the king is, dwell on them, and then move on to the next one. There'll be an outline in the sheet if you want to follow along with that, but they'll also come up on the screen.

So let's pray together. Father, I pray that as we are here tonight, regardless of what our week has been like, and as we head into a time of difference and holiday, a break from work and family, you'd quieten our hearts and still our minds to dwell on the reality and fullness of your son.

Help us to think well of the king tonight. Amen. I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. So Isaiah 11, just to give you a little context of where we are in the Bible, Isaiah is a prophet around the 8th century BC, so he's around 700 years before Jesus was born, and he's writing at a time when the people of God are in a pretty dark place.

[4 : 35] They are terrified because they sense the superpower of the day, Assyria, which seem to be growing in ferocity and might, is coming and has invaded their homeland. And Isaiah foresaw this happening. God warns him that this will happen.

He knows that they are going to decimate the northern kingdom, Israel. And Isaiah himself is in Jerusalem. He's in the southern kingdom of Judah. He's convinced, as God has already told him, the northern kingdom is done for.

That all the ways the people of God have gone astray is going to come in a form of judgment, but that God is going to save them and do something new at the same time. And Isaiah is, as I said, in Jerusalem, the home of David, the family of the ruling kingdom of God's people.

Because throughout the Old Testament, you have this tension as you follow the story of God's people. These people who are saved out of slavery, God calls them to be a new people, a light to the nation.

They have a new identity, centering their entire lives around God to be a blessing to the world around them. Yet we see time after time how in the reality they fail at this mission.

[5 : 41] God then raised up David, the king of the Old Testament, a royal leader who would be a faithful leader on their behalf. Yet even he as a leader has many, many failures. Adultery and a murder among them.

So God promised that a true king would come in the future of David's line. A faithful king who would rise and lead God's people towards faithfulness. This king wouldn't just be a temporary king, but somehow he would last forever.

So one of the main themes of Isaiah, which is why we read it at Christmas, is this idea of future hope, of a promised king that is going to come. So tonight, as I said, we're going to just launch into these five reflections, a classic five-point sermon for you all on the Sunday before Christmas.

So firstly, we see a new shoot in verse 1. This is not open in Isaiah, so I'm going to find that. So it says in verse 1, A new shoot will rise up from the stump of Jesse.

So Jesse was King David's father, and it was David's family line who ruled in Judah. And they were the ones being threatened by Assyria, and would be taken over by Babylon.

[6 : 50] And if the idea was that if the family line was crushed and they all went into exile, maybe they were genuinely fully done for. Maybe God was completely done with them. But into that context, he tells Isaiah this vision that over a shoot, something new will come.

Now a shoot, I've been looking at a lot of different plant, there's a lot of plant imagery in tonight, comes out of a stump or a branch. Now on one level, this is literally just saying, it's the idea of a family tree.

So this new king is going to come in the line of Jesse, in the line of David. And on one level, it is simply a metaphor. But the word stump is kind of getting at this idea of the kind of picture you see on the screen there.

An unused root, a tree that's been cut down, or a trunk, or a stump. Something that looks inherently lifeless. If you would come across such a thing, it would not look like it would be something that would produce new life.

It would look, in fact, like the opposite. And to look at it and think, oh, a new shoot will come out of that, would seem silly. It would seem foolishness at best. And yet hope is one of the key themes that Isaiah is driving us towards.

[7 : 59] As we look at this thing that seems lifeless, God says, something new is going to come out of this. And hope, I don't know about you, but hope is a bit of a tricky customer. Some people think it's blind optimism, that somehow everything's just going to work fine.

If you just cross your fingers and hope for the best, everything's going to be okay. For others, we can have this acute crushing sense that no matter what, life is a bit like a tree stump.

And that that army will eventually come and destroy us all. I'm not sure about you, but hopeful looking into the future is often not a characteristic you might describe the west coast of Scotland as having.

It's not the part of the world I grew up of. In fact, over the past wee while, I've been doing this Advent quiet time series on Jesus being the Prince of Peace. And it's all about, you know, anxiety in the present robs us of peace.

Anxiety about the future, sorry, robs us of peace. But as I've been doing, I've been quite challenged that I actually find peace quite anxiety-driven. I've got this kind of thought in my head of like, well, something bad's eventually going to happen, so you may as well get it over and done with now, God.

[9 : 03] Let's just get this out of the way. And sometimes some people might call that realism. Some people might accurately call it cynicism. But it actually has a very low, at its worst, it can have

a low level of faith.

Things are ultimately just how they appear to be. There is nothing we can really do about it. And actually one of the beautiful messages of the good news is there is nothing we can really do about it.

And that's where the hope of this new king comes at something different. It is tempting a form that can creep into a lot of our hearts, I think, particularly even as Christians, that we can look at these situations around the world and think it's hopeless.

More than that, sometimes we can even look inwards and have a painful self-awareness that arrive at a singular conclusion. That no matter how much we try or how much discipline we attempt, we're just not the people we hope or think we should be.

One of my, I don't know where how pretentious this sentence sounds, one of my favorite photojournalists is a Brazilian called Sebastiao Salgado. And he spent this whole career documenting workers of the world.

[10:12] So he went around photographing them for years and years and years. And there's a documentary made about his life in 2014 called Salt of the Earth, where he starts to go and photograph refugees around the world, particularly those affected by the Yugoslavian wars and the Rwandan genocide.

And after a year of doing it, he is so disillusioned that he doesn't even think his work has any meaning anymore. And he stops. He stops being a photographer. He said the whole thing is hopeless. So he retreats to his family plot in Brazil, where he's got some land, which has been decimated by deforestation, and they start to repopulate the land with trees.

And this gives him a new sense of purpose. And he actually starts to go around the world with this new photo. So this is one of the photos from the project. Just be clear, this guy's not a believer in God at all. And he starts to try and find places in the world that have been untouched by badness, untouched by human hands.

He called this project Genesis. And he went around the world saying, wherever we can find humans that have not been touched by the modern world, and nature is beautiful and kind, then maybe we can find hope in that.

And on one level, from a humanist point of view, it's a very like rousing film. This hope is ultimately about going back to something, going back to something simpler, going back to an age that, imagine if we were not involved in this world at all.

[11:34] And sometimes that's the way hope can look for a lot of us, if we could just go back, if things were simpler, easier, or safer. The biblical prophets are not like that. Isaiah is not like that.

He's not like the concept, like maybe the ideas we have of prophets where they look into a crystal ball and look off into the future. The biblical prophets look back at who God is, what he says he is like, and because of his faithfulness, because of his word, it gives them confidence to look forward to their present day and beyond.

It generates a hope for them, not because of what they want to go back to or something they want to change. This is not an anti-eco message, just to be clear. But it's the idea of where you see your hope.

And actually, I remember watching this film and thinking, oh, it's beautiful, then realizing there's a kind of lie right in the idea. Imagine we had a world where essentially humans didn't exist. That's his hope.

And it's kind of an empty hope. Christian hope is never about going backwards. It's about being called into something new, into the light. Christian hope never denies the reality of the pain in the front of you.

[12:41] It never does that. Yet at the same time, it never says that the sin or the pain or the suffering has the final word. That there's something bigger than that. This new shoot that is to come.

Isaiah is calling the reader, as we are invited to do at Christmas and all of our lives, to see the shoot of new life in the most unexpected places. God promises a new David will grow out of the stump. So, what is this new king like? So, we move into verses two and three. And it says, verses two and three.

Sorry, I'm off of my page here. Give me a second. The spirit of the Lord will rest in him, this king. The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of the knowledge

and fear of the Lord, and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears. So, predictably, this king is pretty amazing.

[13 : 45] Just briefly, some things about him. He's endowed with the spirit of God, which empowers him to have wisdom and understanding, to be the perfect leader, to have counsel and might, to carry out his wise plans.

He has the knowledge and fear of the Lord, making him perfectly holy. It doesn't just mean that the king has power to do what needs to be done. He also knows exactly what needs to be done. He has the wisdom to do it, and he has the power to do it, and he knows how to get it done. Then it says, he will not judge based on what he sees with his eyes or hears with his ears.

Again, this is another metaphor for wisdom. This king is full of wisdom. I mean, you think about how wisdom works. I don't know about you, but when I think of all the stupid choices I've made in life, 99% of them are by what my eyes see and my ears hear and sound good.

This king judges things differently. This king has perfect wisdom, and the wisdom of Jesus is obviously a major theme as we think about Advent and Christmas.

[14 : 44] The kings, the wise kings, come and lay down gifts in front of the baby, Jesus. That is both true, but it's a metaphor, but worldly wisdom submitting to the wisdom and plans of the king.

The way in which God saves the world through this child, which starts to find its fulfillment at Christmas, the whole plan of salvation is said throughout the New Testament to sound as foolishness to the world.

It is wisdom in God's paradigm, in God's way of seeing things. Everything Jesus does with his life, in some level, turns the wisdom of the world on its head.

It's often in a confront, a confront, it confronts and is affront to contemporary understandings of success. Yes, the wisdom of God is not the wisdom of the world.

Even when you think about the Christmas story, if you were the Messiah and you knew you were coming and you had a message that concerned life and death and you wanted to reach as many people as possible, I would probably arrive with the biggest fanfare in the world.

[15 : 47] I'd try and make as loud a noise as I could. Something extravagant, something to get people's attention. That's how we would do it, wouldn't it? That is not how God does it at all.

This new shoot comes into the world. We're told in the nativity story, surrounded by animal feed, the smell of urine, stables, and that poor family.

This king chooses to be born into poverty. This is the wisdom of God. Spends most of his life in small, out-of-the-way villages. He doesn't have a career in urban or cultural centers.

In fact, he seems to spend most of his life avoiding those places. It doesn't have to do with any networks of politics or influence. And then at the beginning of his career, he gets executed pretty young in disgrace.

If you get any books around Christmas on self-help or leadership development, you're probably not going to find that plan in any chapter of how to reach the world. And the wisdom of the world, the wisdom of God often seems foolish.

[16 : 48] But God's gospel wins in the gospel story. Because it's about a completely different way. It's about a king who comes with all his power, all his wisdom, and lays it down.

It goes against the way a lot of us have been often taught to thought about when we think about success. The message of Isaiah at Christmas is that God, in a miraculous way, has punched a hole in time, space, and history in the most unexpected ways.

And because of that, there is now hope. There is mercy. There is power. Because of the nature of who he is. You see that in the beautiful picture of a manger. It's a child in a little manger.

And in that, he's told, there's glory in there. So, a new shoot, a new king, and a new justice. So, what does this king do?

What's he like? On verses four and five, we are told, but with righteousness, he will judge the needy. With justice, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. And he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.

[17 : 59] With the breath of his lips, he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt.

Faithfulness, the sash around his waist. So, just to kind of do a little bit of work on some of these words to get at what is really being said here.

So, when it says he judges the needy, it doesn't mean he's going to come and condemn them. It means he will make things right or just for the needy. He will give decisions for the poor. And that word poor means the downtrodden, people without power. And again, when it says he makes decisions for the poor of the earth, it's a slight, well, no, there's more intelligent people in the room than me.

I think it's a slightly clumsy translation to our modern ears. What it means is he's going to stand in their place and exercise his power. He's going to identify with the poor and give decisions on their behalf and use his power to make things right for them.

And he's going to do it through bringing justice and judgment. And we'll touch on that towards the end about some of the detail of that. So, what does that mean?

[19:06] Well, it means on many levels, regardless of where you find yourself in life, the people who are powerless, which ultimately are all of us in the grand scheme of the gospel, he identifies with and uses his power to stand in the place and do something and judge.

Christmas, I think, actually shed some light in this because it tells us of the length the king will go to to identify with the poor and the needy. The son of God was born into a poor family. Like, there's many examples of that, but the one I was reading about this week is when Mary and Joseph take the young Jesus to the temple to offer, they have to offer a sacrifice.

And I was reading that apparently the sacrifices they offer are contingent on how much money you have. And they offer two birds, which is the lowest form they can. And he chooses to be born into a poor family.

Verse five tells us, this king is not clothed with the trappings of human ego, but is truly qualified to rule the world. Because he's characterized instead by righteousness and faithfulness.

He doesn't come as a general or a philosopher or a politician, but as a joiner son. And you look at his life. He didn't just preach the gospel, he fed the hungry, healed the sick, raised the dead.

[20:20] It's a character of God that isn't just about the glory of self, but the giving away for the sake of the poor and the needy to the point he gives himself away. So what does it mean for us?

I mean, I think it means among many things that should be part of our priority too. In a time when most of us, myself included, can be consumed by a pretty materialistic view of the world and what I can get out of the Christmas break, what it means to join in and celebrate with a king who comes close to the needy, who comes close to those in need.

He didn't just have a concern from afar, he didn't commute in to help the poor, he participated. And in a non-patronizing way, what does it mean for us, the body of Christ, to come alongside those who are most needy?

That is both social, but it's also spiritual. It's a huge subject we can say a lot on, but Christmas points us in that direction. The king will and does care about those on the margins and identifies and participates with them and will use his power to do something about it.

And we'll go on to the next few verses, verses six to nine. A new creation. Because you could hear that, we could end there and you think, oh great, Jesus is some sort of enlightened civil servant.

[21:40] A king who will come and create more social justice and that's great. And you know, the scriptures are very full of the connection with our faith and how we live that out with the poor. But the next few verses smash against the idea of Jesus as some sort of eternal social worker.

So, in verses six to nine, you get this beautiful poetry about animals. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together.

And the little child will lead them. The cull will feed the bear. Their young will lie down together and the lion will eat straw like an ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den and the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain. For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

So, there's a lot going on in these verses. This king isn't just coming to make the world a little bit better. He's going to get rid of death, disease, violence, suffering, sin.

[22:50] He's going to make everything right. This is poetically depicting by showing some of the most violent creatures in their imaginations, lions and bears and wolves and cobras, playing and snuggling around with things that are weak and vulnerable like lambs and calves and babies.

Creation itself will undergo a transformation under this king. He's going to take everything and make it new. I don't know if you've had the annual conversation I seem to get into around this time of year

that Christmas is just some sort of pagan festival stolen by Christmas.

I was actually at dinner last night where sometimes I get into these situations where as soon as I reveal what I do as a job you get a series of like oh and then we got into this conversation.

And it's true that while there's a lot of pagan festivals around winter time that involve nature the huge difference obviously I hope you would know is that paganism terminates their focus and worship on creation itself.

The BBC I was reading an article this morning on the BBC that they reckon 1,500 people in the UK took part in some sort of winter solstice celebration festival this week because winter solstice was yesterday the shortest day of winter.

[24 : 11] And the early Christians you can read I'd encourage you to go and read Acts 17 if you want to see an example of that were excellent at seeing misplaced worship of the world around them and pointing it to their true source.

Acts 17 as I said sees Paul encountering pagans and philosophers and he comes alongside and observes what they're up to and says you're close but you're also absolutely nowhere near. There's a longing and especially in this part of the world in history for light and life at this time of year. It was all about the physical the things which died things that could never fully hold our hope. Again I think that's what that photographer that I was talking about earlier his hope is in the physical creation.

The scriptures instead are full of language about how creation points to God to his power to his wisdom to divine nature. This is where we get real hope and redemption from.

Isaiah says himself later in chapter 40 verse 26 lift up your eyes and look to the heavens who created all these he who brings out the starry host one by one calls forth each of them by name because of his great power and mighty strength not one of them is missing.

[25 : 25] So yeah you can see a photo if you like this was yesterday in Stonehenge and like we think of these things like I've got friends who they're definitely on they would say they're on a spiritual quest so some of the people I can't imagine they're going to listen to this but I'll acknowledge I'm talking about you right now.

Some of them are from the yoga world and it's all about embracing the goodness of nature and it sounds a beautiful message but it's really detached from their day to day lives yet there's something we can observe in something that creation today is the first day as we head towards more light is saying something because the scriptures are full that creation says something about who God is. Now we do not worship that or trust in that but we can see something of the pattern of the gospel under it. Under this king the predators of empire and death and sin will no longer hurt or destroy God's people who instead will dwell in peace and safety in his holy mountain that's what it says in verse 9.

God will bring about a transformation of the earth in the gospel creation is headed towards peace under the king not because of itself not because of his inherent ability to regenerate itself but because a king is going to come and reestablish the order of how things work.

Isaiah again says in chapter 55 verse 12 you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace the mountains and hills will burst into song before you and all the trees of the field will clap their hands as it all gears towards praise of the one true God who holds it together and out of hope says I'm bringing this not because of anything you can do but because of who he is which is where we're going to finish in verse 10.

[27 : 10] Verse 10 says and in that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples the nations will rally to him and his resting place will be glorious.

So the king who brings about this transformation of a new shoot of a new wisdom of a justice of all of creation going somewhere new will also become a rallying point for all the nations we're told in verse 10.

But in this verse we see something even more unique about the king. So in verse 1 he's described as a shoot but in verse 10 it doesn't say that he's a shoot of Jesse but he is the root of Jesse.

Now I'm no biologist but from what I understand about plants plants come from roots. So it's a cutting edge insight she came to here at church tonight. So the thing the shoot grows out of the very root itself.

It is saying this king is both root and shoot. What it's saying here is that Jesse and David are actually descendants of the king. So how can something be both a shoot and a root at the same time?

[28 : 23] How can it be both the source and the descendant at the same time? Well I think the only answer which is the answer throughout the entirety of scripture which makes Christianity complete unique to every other religion and philosophy in the world which makes Christmas a totally unique event is that the creator God the source of us all comes into the world and he comes as a weak human being and a descendant of David.

The one born in the manger is not just human and is not just divine he is both he is man and God he is shoot and root.

This means that he is not just one more religious founder one more prophet or sage come to tell us how to find God he is God come to find me and you. But he is also not just a God who has come to tell us how to live he is a God come to die and that is partly why he comes in weakness to go to the cross and this becomes this root becomes a rallying point for all of humanity.

The reason we can feel hopeless is because there are many reasons to be. It says so in verse 4 and 5 that he will strike the earth through the rod of his mouth he will with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

There is lots of evil and injustice and it's not just out there it's in here too and he has come to deal with that but Christmas tells us he has come as the God into the world in weakness to go to the cross and deal with it by taking it on himself.

[30 : 03] It's the ultimate gift of grace it's the ultimate gift I had some cheesy stuff here about in the Christmas of gift giving series like how do you but it's part of the reason we give gifts it's like the ultimate gift that God gives is the gift of God himself to achieve the thing that none of us can do when we look to the hopelessness around us inside and outside.

Grace is costly love that's why we gather around a king of grace grace says there is judgment there is judgment and sin and all the ways me and you both commit and experience all the manifestations of what it means to try and be our own gods every day it's a hopeless story if somehow we think we can fix it ourselves whereas this story this new king that comes out of what appears like a hopeless situation and it isn't just to fix things is to come into the world full of wisdom full of justice taking all of creation somewhere new because he's the beginning as well as the end so just to finish as we some questions for us to reflect on as we head into wherever you're you might be staying around Glasgow or wherever you're going next what is the hope that guides your life when things are hard what is it you're going to hope will give you esteem or a feeling of self-worth as you head into Christmas

I don't know about you but I feel sometimes when I will arrive at different variations of my family I'll get the question of what are you doing with your life are you still doing that random thing with that Christian organization I'd hope after 10 years they'd have picked up by now but if that's our hope that one day our family and peers will respect us that we'll have enough stuff that we'll meet the special someone who will fulfill us not bad things in and of themselves but if they're not God not only will they disappoint us they will ultimately desert us God full of wisdom full of life comes into every situation we're in as a new shoot not just to tell us to have a better time in the world but to say to us these situations which is not just about the physical and the here and now but it's about our souls as well has come to do something about it and he comes in weakness but full of power and grace

Jesus in Advent invites us to live with a certain hope even in the midst of a world where we experience many different things from loss to health to money to nations that are going against war with one another and Isaiah is showing us that the wisdom of God has been revealed it has come to do something we couldn't do for ourselves God has come to miraculously break into our world he has done it in the past and the prophets and the new testament the whole scripture don't cross their fingers and hope for the best but they look to God's covenant to his word to his patience one of the ways you look at Isaiah is God's patience with his people I will do this thing for you even though there's nothing you've done to deserve this this is the grace we celebrate in our king so I'm going to pray and then Dan and the band will come up in that day the root of

Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples the nations will rally to him and his resting place will be glorious father we thank you that we can look to the son of God and we can rally to him that we can come to you not because of anything we do but because of the beauty of the king that is described from long ago who has risen today we pray Lord that that would be a message of hope not just for ourselves but the many different places we find ourselves over the coming days and weeks I say in Jesus name amen would you please stand now sign for come inn amen in

[35 : 04] And ransom captive Israel That mourns in lonely exile