Isaiah 9:1-2,6-7 for Christmas Day 2017

 So did you get everything on your Christmas list? If you are the sort of person who only puts one or two things on a Christmas list, you might have! But you didn’t put most of what you hope for on the Christmas list. That would have been unrealistic.

 Isaiah chapter nine is a Christmas list description of a Savior. He is everything we could need. Isaiah spoke in a way that the people of his day could understand. For us to go back and put ourselves in the shoes of Isaiah’s audience, let’s imagine.

 Let’s imagine, just wild imaginations, that a foreign power has conquered the northern part of the United States. They are up there, just twelve miles north of us, right across the Ohio River, just sitting there. You don’t know when they are going to launch their offensive, but you are pretty sure it is going to happen sooner rather than later. What would you do? I know what I would do: Pack up the family and move far and fast. But what if you couldn’t get out? It would be nerve-wracking. I wouldn’t be able to sleep. When are they coming? And when they get here, what will they do?

 ***“The people walking in darkness… those living in the land of the shadow of death”*** were just such people. Isaiah was talking about a political reality of the people in northern Israel, the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. They always bore the brunt of war, and war was quite common in Isaiah’s years. Whether it was the Arameans or the Assyrians or the Babylonians, whenever any foreign army set out to conquer Israel, the northern tribes were the frontier. They bore the brunt of it. Without telecommunications of any sort, civilians often didn’t know it was going to happen until it had already happened.

 Imagine life like that. Imagine life with a continual gnawing worry, “Dear God, I hope it’s not this month, this year. It’s looking like we are going to have a great harvest!” “Please not now, she is expecting.” “If it has to happen, at least let my kids grow a couple years.” The Holy Spirit, through the prophet Isaiah speaks to this political reality and applies it to spiritual realities.

 For people living in the land of the shadow of death, Isaiah prophesied a light, the dawning of a new day. Should we be surprised that these northern reaches of Israel were the very place where Jesus, the Light of the World, grew up and carried out most of his ministry? Isaiah told these anxious people to look forward with hope. God would give a most wonderful gift.

 With prophetic eye Isaiah said, ***“To us a child is born, to us a son is given… and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace… He will reign on David’s throne… from that time on and forever.”***

 Isaiah says that this promised one, this Messiah, will completely fill out our spiritual Christmas list.

 The Messiah would be a ***“Wonderful Counselor.”*** He would teach his people how to be saved and how to live. He would have the advice, the counsel that leads to eternal life.

 He is ***“Mighty God.”*** Isaiah sees a Messiah who will be nothing short of God. Therefore he will conquer enemies we could not conquer through our own strength.

 ***“Everlasting Father.”*** I remember first appearing as a missionary pastor at a church in a certain African village. I was 26 years of age. The congregational chairman, Mr. Chiverevere, obviously of different color skin, and well into his 70’s walking with a cane stood in front of the congregation and said, “Today I welcome my father.” I was wondering if this guy was off his rocker. He, like Isaiah, used the word “Father” figuratively. The father’s primary function is protector of the family. ***“Everlasting Father”*** teaches not so much of the Savior’s person, but his work. Isaiah was saying that this Savior would be a protector of his people.

 ***“Prince of Peace.”*** The Israelites dearly hoped for peace. Isaiah prophesied a Messiah who would bring a peace which had never before been seen on earth.

 Of course, the people who listened to Isaiah didn’t understand the full extent of what Isaiah was saying. But in this prophesy, God said two things they could understand:

 1) He knew their needs and he would answer their needs.

 2) He gave enough of a description of the Promised Savior that even through mistaken preconceived ideas, they and we would be able to recognize the Promised Savior when he did come.

 Through faith, God’s people accepted that what God promised for Christmas Day would be the answer to all their deepest needs. That this Messiah fulfilled God’s prophecies tells us that it was no accident. He was part of God’s comprehensive, loving, long-term plan to save us. Amen.

Luke 2:1-20 for Christmas Day 2017

 ***“A Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord!”***

 Angels announced it in song. And I don’t think that God had to voluntold the angels. One of the fun facts of the Bible is that *“Even angels long to look into these things”* (1 Peter 1). God’s word gives us this sidelight that not even the angels really know how the God’s plans will unfold. And because of that imperfect knowledge, the angels like us, get curious. They want to know more. And like us, when they find out more, they get excited about it. When that child was born to Mary and Joseph, the angels got excited too! They had seen the Fall into sin. Even in heaven they had experienced the rebellion of Satan and his evil angels. They had been witnessing mortal man at war with man for centuries. So when the remedy for the ruin appeared, they got excited, and God turned let his angels loose. And how they sang! What good news! That would have been a concert worth seeing!

 It was only fitting that God let the angels sing, ***“Glory to God in the highest!”*** The Son of God has taken on flesh and enters the created world. The Savior begins the greatest of deed ever accomplished upon this earth: the conquering of sin, death and the devil. It was right that a heavenly honor guard escorted him into the world!

 Might I suggest an additional reason for the angels? If the angels had not sung, no one would have known! From our perspective we think, it’s pretty obvious: City of David, born of a virgin, angels everywhere. Of course he was the Savior! It was not so obvious to those sleeping in the Bethelehem inn.

 In the course of life, maybe you talk to someone on the phone or through email for years and years. But you never meet them in person. And then somehow, you finally meet. It turns out that the person you thought you knew is nothing like what you expected. Doesn’t look like you imagined them. Quirky mannerisms. What had been happening over the years was your mind was filling in what you didn’t know. The things you knew about the person, well, that was ok. But there was so much you didn’t know that your mind filled in the blanks. And now you are sort of confused about the person standing in front of you.

 When the Messiah came, he matched up with everything God had said. But God had not prophesied every detail, and people had filled in the details with their own wishes and dreams, and ignored one or two details. One thing that was contrary to all expectations, one thing people kept tripping over about Jesus was his humility. Even people who went to the synagogue every single week and listened to their Old Testaments faithfully, when they finally came face to face with the real Messiah, many didn’t recognize him.

 Yet this humility is the great glory of Jesus and the Christmas message. It was his glory from his birth in a stable, to his death on a cross, to the borrowed tomb where he was buried. His humility assures us that he came for us. This humility is the very thing that Jesus again and again had to explain so that people would understand that his first and greatest role is to be our sin-bearing substitute.

 *“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mt 20:28). *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”* (Mt 11:29). *“I am among you as one who serves”* (Lk 22:27). And there are more. It is Jesus’ great glory that if angels had not announced his birth, no one would have known! That very humility, that submission to God’s law and sin’s punishment and death, *that* has saved us.

 So go to the fields around Bethlehem, not the temple, and listen to the angels’ songs. Look in the manger, not the palaces, at one so humble. And go out glorifying and praising God for all the things you have heard and seen, which were just as God had said.

Hebrews 1:1-9 for Christmas Day 2017

 It is a huge advantage to have hindsight, to look back with 20/20 vision.

 If you are old enough, think of Cold War tensions in the 1980’s, even into the late 80’s. If you lived through it, or if you served through it, you can remember the concerns, the worries of armed conflict, maybe even nuclear war. In 1991, only a couple years later the entire Soviet Union dissolved. Looking back, we can see that for many years the Soviet Union had not been a credible threat. But it didn’t feel like it at the time.

 With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight we often see the truth more clearly that the people who were in the middle of it.

 We have seen that in Jesus’ life. The Gospels of the Bible are a record of Jesus speaking and acting—and people misunderstanding. His disciples, the ones closest to him, misunderstood him perhaps the most. Think of some of their misunderstandings: arguments about who would be greatest in Jesus’ kingdom, one disciple drawing a sword to protect Jesus, two others asking Jesus’ permission to curse a village which had turned Jesus out. We can look back with 20/20 vision and see that they really didn’t get it, at least not then.

 What a blessing our hindsight is. I think that each of us is realistic enough to thank God that we are where we are. Sure, we would have loved to walk beside Jesus and see him give sight to the blind, to hear him preach to the crowds, to watch him feed the 5,000. But if you have ever thought about it, you have probably reflected that if you had been living in Palestine in the time of Jesus, you might have had a tough time believing in Jesus—a man who talked with a backwoods accent, who didn’t have a penny to his name, came from humble beginnings and associated almost exclusively with humble people.

 In a sense, it is from the perspective of hindsight that our final reading is written. It is written from the perspective that we have, where we can look back on Jesus’ life and see how it unfolded. Not the shadowy perspective of prophecy, but through the corrective eye-wear of history.

Listen to verse 3, ***“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”*** What a beautiful summary of who Jesus is and what he did! It is kind of the twelfth grade English class version of John 3:16. It is such a beautiful summary of Jesus, that it bears reading again, and maybe you can follow along. In verse 3 it says, ***“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”***

 True God, purifying us from sin, ruling as God in heaven. Thank God we can look back at our Savior and see that.

 However, it is not hindsight that has saved you. It is faith. And there is a significant difference between hindsight and faith. Hindsight is a human judgment. Faith is as Jesus told the Apostle Peter, *“Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”* (Mt 16:17).

 Yes, thank God in heaven that you can look at the Christ-child and know just who he is! Amen.

 And maybe this will teach us to be a little more generous to the people of Jesus’ day.

 But remember, these people had not seen the Messiah, they were waiting for a Messiah, hoping for a Messiah. They had not met him. They would not meet him in their lifetimes. And so some of their expectations didn’t quite match what they found. Yet it was enough.

 Before we throw to many rocks, let us consider what Christ’s second coming will be like. I am sure it will be just the same. When Jesus comes and takes us to heaven, I think every single one of us, myself included, are going to look around and say, “This is nothing like I expected.” And then we will remember our Bibles and laugh at ourselves as we realize that heaven will be just like God had told us in his word, but that we couldn’t see through our misconceptions.

 I say that so that we realize that the people of Isaiah’s day, the people of Jesus’ day, actually had a pretty diff