

Advent's Fierce Peace

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Isaiah 11:1-10

Every year during Advent, we hear about the “stump of Jesse” and the lion laying down with the lamb, but what does all of this mean? It is easy for biblical prophecies to sound like nice religious language with poetic flourish, but little meat on the bones. However, prophecies like this one from Isaiah 11 are essential our understanding of who Jesus is and what kind of victory he wins by his coming into the world. He is not just a nice religious teacher, but the king who brings justice for the poor and strikes the wicked with “the rod of his mouth.” His coming is a fierce arrival of judgment and the blossoming of a new era of hope and salvation. He conquers injustice and brings us into an age of perfect peace.

We have a lot more to look forward to at Christmas than a bunch of presents under the tree. The Baby of Bethlehem is not just cute and cuddly, but he comes to establish his reign over the universe, and most especially in our very hearts. Isaiah 11 offers us another glimpse into what the reign of this coming Messiah will look like—how it can and will transform us from the inside out if only we open our hearts to the child in the manger.

A Shoot from a Stump

The prophecy begins with a botanical reference—a shoot sprouting from a stump. This image comes from the cultivation of olive trees, an image also referred to in Psalm 128:3, which pictures sons as olive shoots around the table of their father. The basic idea is that old olive trees cease producing fruit from the main trunk, instead sprouting fruit-bearing shoots from the base of the stump, which grow up around the fruitless central trunk. One olive trunk could have three, four, or more mature shoots spring up around it, like “sons” around their “father’s” table. The “stump” is not necessarily cut down, just unfruitful. Here in Isaiah 11, the messianic king is pictured as a shoot and Jesse (David’s father) as the stump. This is significant, in that Isaiah is inviting us to see the Messiah not as another one of David’s heirs, who have failed to be faithful to the Lord, but as *another David*, a new son of Jesse.

Gifts of the Spirit

The second verse mentions seven attributes of the Messiah, which the Church has adopted as the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (*Catechism*, 1831). These gifts are not just characteristics of Christ, but are given to the baptized as dynamisms which bring Christ-like virtues to completion in us. Notably, the translation of the last two elements in our NAB translation follows the Hebrew, which differs slightly from ancient Greek and Latin versions. In v. 2, where the Hebrew indicates “fear of the Lord,” the Greek has *eusebeia*, godliness, and the Latin similarly has *pietas*, piety. In v. 3, where the Hebrew begins a new idea about the Messiah’s “delight” being in the fear of the Lord, the Greek and Latin continue the series of attributes, saying he will be “filled with” the fear of the Lord. The tradition of the Seven Gifts follows from the Greek and Latin versions.

Judgment and Fidelity

The Messiah, like David (1 Sam 16:13), will have the spirit of the Lord. Also, the picture of an ideal messianic king recalls the prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-9. In the passage at hand, the gifts of the Holy Spirit lay the groundwork for the messianic king’s just judgment. The three pairs of ideas in 11:2 (wisdom/understanding; counsel/strength; knowledge/fear of the Lord) are the foundation of messianic rule: right judgment, execution of judgment, and covenant loyalty. Isaiah highlights the messianic king’s

covenant knowledge of God and his covenant loyalty displayed by his wisdom and obedience. Isaiah 11:3-4a emphasizes the idea that the Messiah will hand out judgment impartially, so that even the poor and oppressed, who can't hire high-powered lawyers from big firms and therefore usually get the short end of the stick, will receive just and proper judgment. The second half of v. 4 indicates the power that the messianic king possesses, power to punish evildoers and bring about justice for the oppressed. The Messiah does not just bring peace and flowers, but just judgment which sets things right. The "rod of his mouth" in v. 4 is like the sword in the mouth of the Messiah at the Second Coming (Rev 19:15), a symbol for his judgment. Isaiah 11:5 draws attention to the fidelity of the messianic king, his loyalty to God's covenant. Its picture of covenant loyalty as clothing reveals the closeness of loyalty—it is something that we wrap ourselves with, indicating its importance in our hearts.

The Messianic Age of Peace

Isaiah 11:6-9 paints an idyllic scene, which depicts the reign of the Messiah through the behavior of animals. Once his reign is established, the carnivores will become herbivores; the predators and their prey will lie down peaceably together. It may seem that a bizarre turn has taken place: we were talking about the new David's just judgment and equitable rule and now we're in a James Herriott book, looking at the cute animals behaving in strange ways. But the point is more symbolic than literal. The predators (wolf, leopard, lion, bear, cobra, adder) symbolize the oppressors, and the prey (lamb, kid, child, calf, cow) symbolize the oppressed. Those who had been enemies will now be friends. The oppressors will be at peace with the oppressed. The alarming idea of a baby playing by a cobra's den reminds me of the climax of Rudyard Kipling's story, *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*. In that tale, the cobra villain slithers up to a family's breakfast table and is poised to strike the baby—mom and dad are both paralyzed with fear, when all of the sudden the story's hero mongoose attacks the cobra and saves the baby's life. After the messianic king executes his judgment, an era of peace will be ushered in. Note that in v. 9, the prophet explains that the reason that peace will reign in "all my holy mountain" (Jerusalem) is because "knowledge of the Lord" will have spread to the whole world. The lesson is that covenantal knowledge of God brings about peace. Of course, this final peace has only begun to be brought about through the life and proclamation of Jesus, but will come to its lasting fulfillment at the final judgment.

The last verse of our passage, Isaiah 11:10, depicts the “root of Jesse” as a signal, standard, or rallying point for the nations. The Hebrew word for “root” is not the same as “stump” in 11:1, which indicates to me that 11:10 is talking about the shoot of 11:1, not the stump. The messianic shoot has become a point of in-gathering, both for the dispersed people of Israel and Judah (11:11-12) and for the Gentiles (11:10).

Summary

This passage in Isaiah prophesies the just and wise reign of the messianic king, a new David who will judge the oppressors wisely and execute just judgment powerfully. He will be characterized by his covenantal loyalty to the Lord and his judgment will bring about an age of peace and ingathering. It is a baby who champions such a powerful peace that babies and cobras can live in harmony.

*Editor's Note: **Unpacking the Old Testament** is a new series by CatholicBibleStudent.com's Dr. Mark Giszczak. Dr. Giszczak is here to help us all come to a richer understanding of what can otherwise be a very daunting collection of books, the Old Testament. Look for his column every Friday from Catholic Exchange.*