

December 1, 2019

Good News (or Not) for the World

Isaiah 9:1-7

Seen on Facebook: *Gary Nelson*¹ wonders why we love to talk so much about things we should simply be living out? Some of the comments people posted:

- *Good question. We should convene a colloquium to consider it.*
- *Mostly because we don't plan to ever live them out. If we were living them we would not have to talk about them.*
- *If we actually lived them out, we would discover that we have no right to complain about each other.*

Do we talk too much about things we should simply be living out? What do you think?

It was a dark and stormy night ...

People in Isaiah's day were "in distress" (9:1). It felt like overwhelming darkness was closing in around them (9:2). The context of Isaiah 9 is this: what was once one nation of Israel under kings like David and Solomon is now divided:

- The northern kingdom, still called "Israel," has fallen away from God (King Pekah assassinated his way to kingship, not exactly a man after God's own heart).
- The southern kingdom, Judah, keeps the faith – sort of. It is ruled by King Ahaz, descendant of King David. Ahaz is staring down the spears of two angry armies – one of them his own Jewish kin from the northern kingdom of Israel. Ahaz sees no hope for his country. And, the traditions of the day being what they were, he saw no hope for himself or his family: captured kings were (at best) executed or (at worst) tortured and then executed, their heads impaled on spikes above their own city gate (and you thought you had stress in your life?).

These days people can feel "in distress" and like overwhelming darkness is closing in around them as well. And, no, it's not simply about the fact it snowed in September or the disappointing Calgary Flames' season. It's about fear for one's education, livelihood, pension, health care and supports in a culture of austerity. It's about fear in a world of uncertain geopolitics, culture wars, generational wars, trade wars, military wars, and terrorism. It's about fear in a changing climate where wildfires, floods, and hurricanes are worse than ever. It's about a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in the midst of an opioid epidemic. It's about fear for your own family and friends. It's about fear for your own financial, physical, and mental health.

Whenever there is an election, there is hope that the new government will solve all our problems. "*The hopes and fear of all the years*" are placed on the shoulders of the new Mayor, Premier, Prime Minister, or President. How does that work out?

¹ Gary, former General Secretary of Canadian Baptist Ministries, is President of Tyndale University College & Seminary

Politicians create fear to get elected. Richard Nixon once quipped, *"People react to fear not love- they don't teach you that in Sunday School but it's true."* But then those same politicians don't have the slightest idea how to address, let alone solve, the challenges that we actually do face. They talk, and talk, and talk ...

God wasn't content simply to talk about what needed to be done to save His people. The Christmas story is a story of action. It's a story of action in the past, but also a powerful comment on present realities, and a promise of hope for the future ...

Isaiah helps us step back a bit and think about what the coming of Jesus is really all about. With all the problems in the world. With all the crises. With all the conflict. With all the fear. What we need now, more obviously now than ever, is someone who can take on all our problems and carry them for us – more than that, who can deal with them for us. We need help! *"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us,"* Isaiah says. *"The government will rest on his shoulders ..."* Is this really Good News?

Where does "Christmas" fit in to the real world?

Yes, we are facing real problems. Serious problems. The problem is NOT that some people call it "the Holiday Season" instead of "Christmas." Frankly the sappy Santa-Claus-Christmas-Prince-romance-movie-and-baby-in-a-manger some people equate with Christmas is no solution to the BIG challenges our world is facing. We need real hope, real peace, real love, and real joy, not warm fuzzies and a tacky manger scene.

Christmas is about the coming of Jesus. Rome, the global superpower, ruled by fear: they didn't like migrants, so they ordered everyone back to where they belonged to pay more taxes. That's how the Middle East worked then, and, with minor adjustments, that's how the world works today. This is Caesar's world, and unless you're foolish enough to try to buck the system you do what you were told (ask people in Hong Kong).

But, the child who is born *is* in fact the true King, the Messiah, proclaimed in all the old prophecies, King, not of one small country far away, not of a heavenly kingdom removed from this earth, but of King of this earth, this domain claimed by Caesar and taxed by Caesar, the world where people like you and I live and love, work and dream.

But the Kingdom of God, which comes with Jesus, is a radically different empire, with a radically different kind of emperor. Jesus isn't simply another politician on whom everyone can pin their hopes and who will then let them down. His way of establishing God's justice and peace on the earth is different than Caesar's, different than the usual power plays of politicians, armies, and superpowers (then or now).

Isaiah puts words to our hunger for hope, for the coming Messiah:

- *"You will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders; you will break the oppressor's rod,"* declares the prophet (9:4): good

news for a people, like so many today, who honestly see little hope – whether from family problems, debt problems, economic problems, or political issues.

- *"The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned. They will be fuel for the fire"* (9:5): great news for a people, like so many today, who find themselves caught up in wars they neither started nor wanted. And we, who hear these sorrows far away, are nevertheless aware that in a globalized world these affect us, too.

Isaiah cries out that it's time for a different kind of world, a different kind of empire. What we need is a new way of doing things. That's what the Christmas message is all about: *"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity"* (9:6-7).

Christmas is about the coming of the world's true King ...

Jesus did more than just talk about it

But does He do this? It sounds like a nice dream, but ... How does this actually play out in the real world? The story the Jesus is the story of a real person – fully God and fully human – putting God's kingdom into practice. By the way He lives, love, and forgives, He says through His actions and His words, *"This is what it looks like when God is running things."* He doesn't turn the world upside down; He turns the world right side up.

Jesus comes to get God's Kingdom off the ground – or we could say, **on** the ground. He takes on the injustice, brokenness, pain, and power of evil, so the rule of evil could be broken and something new, good and wonderful could take its place. Jesus shows us what an alternative society – God's society – looks like.

- ***Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor***, goes to work, loving individuals, caring for them, forgiving them, making a tangible difference in their lives dealing with their needs and the social, cultural, and political systems that oppressed them. He cares for ALL people not just the "right" people (ethnically, socially, economically). He doesn't build walls, He build bridges – between Romans, Jews, Arabs, and more. Followers of Jesus have carried on that mission: providing hospitals and schools, advocating equality and justice, ending slavery and graft.
- ***Jesus, the Mighty God*** comes into His world, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, touching the lepers, rescuing people, giving living water to the thirsty, re-establishing His Kingdom, and restoring creation itself. In practical ways, He brings wholeness and healing to His world. Jesus' people in Lethbridge house migrants, visit the sick, feed the poor, love the unlovely.
- ***Jesus, the Prince of Peace***, takes on the violence and warlords of his world, not by raising an army to do battle, not by forming a political party, but by showing a radically different way to live: to live with values of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

When we live those values, we demonstrate a radically different way to live. A way of life that transforms our community.

- ***Jesus, the Everlasting Father*** in human form, gives Himself totally to His beloved world. He so loves the world, He gives us Himself. Jesus love in action took Him to the cross. Jesus' love in action cost His life – but paradoxically it also won the victory. The same happens as we serve.

What if we followed Jesus ... really?

Jesus' birth was a long time ago. It's a nice story. But is it relevant today? Is it relevant in our world, with our problems? Is it relevant in my world, with my problems? Aren't the real solutions the latest provincial budget or opposition response (depending on your political preference)? If we could just build that pipeline; If we could only change this bill or that bill or get a new bill; if we could get back to business as usual ...

But "business as usual" is what has got us into this mess. The old ways aren't working – honestly, they never really have. We need to find a different type of solution. As the advertising slogan goes: "*You've tried the rest, now try the best.*" What if we honestly gave this a try: "*The government shall be upon **his** shoulders.*"

It's not about legislation. Real change begins when each of us personally chooses a different Master. When our primary loyalty and identity is not to a political party or leader, but to God, and God alone. When our primary loyalty is the Kingdom of God, not the kingdoms of this world. Paul says: "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit*" (Galatians 5:24-25).

Real change happens when our first loyalty is Jesus. No, not the cute Christmas card caricature – the real Jesus. When we pray through, think through, work through what it means to live by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit. We wrestle with how to live out His ways – ways of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) – in practice, in the real world.

So we come back to Gary's haunting question: "*Why do we love to talk so much about things we should simply be living out?*"

Jesus – the real Jesus – did live out the Kingdom of God in the gritty, tough, knock-about world. By putting His kingdom into practice, Jesus began a revolution that changed lives and the course of history. What about us? His "government/rule/reign" happens one person at a time, as we stop talking and simply live it out. Will I do that? How can I live out His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)? Living it out: that is what Christmas is all about.