

During this season, we find Christmas trees just about everywhere—in homes and church, in city parks and shopping malls. It's an interesting tradition we have—to cut down a living tree and then look at it while it slowly dies. Interesting—and *appropriate for Christmas!* And I hope that when you look at your Christmas tree, you'll think of the message of Isaiah.

During the month of December, I've been reading through the book of Isaiah. I've been struck by the imagery of trees—both the destruction and the regrowth of trees.

In chapters 1 and 6, the Lord depicts his judgment of Israel in terms of cutting down a tree and then burning the stump. Then, we learn about the axe that God would use to cut down the tree—the nation of Assyria. In chapter 10, the Lord says that after he is done using Assyria to judge his people, he is going to turn around and judge Assyria. This judgment is depicted as the cutting down of a mighty forest:

Behold, the Lord GOD of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low.
He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the
Majestic One.¹

Assyria is a “forest” that God will mow down and burn it with fire.²

So, the setting for our passage is rather bleak—like the scene after a firestorm sweeps through a forest. Everywhere you look, it is lifeless and black, charred and smoldering—dead. You turn in circles surveying the landscape and wonder—is there any hope for life?

It is in this context that our passage speaks a word of hope. From one of these smoldering and (presumably) dead stumps a sprout will emerge will grow. So, this morning we're going to learn about this Promised One by asking four questions.

Question 1 — Who is this?

First, he is a King. He comes from the “stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of David—Israel's greatest King. God promised that one of David's descendants would reign forever. This king will be the perfect “re-start” to a dynasty that had failed.

Second, he is a resurrection King. The stump represents death—the judgement and destruction of the nation. But it is through this judgement—through death itself—that life and salvation will spring. That will be an important lesson to remember as the storyline of the Bible unfolds—salvation does not circumvent death and judgment, it comes straight through it.

Third, he is a humble King. Assyria was just the sort of superpower that humans look to for security and peace. The Lord describes the King of Assyria a “glorious forest” of

¹ Isaiah 10:33-34

² Isaiah 10:17-18

great and lofty—*proud*—trees. Human nations often love proud and boastful leaders—but God hates them. Listen to what the Lord judges and why:

When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. For he says:

“By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding...”³

Because the leader speaks boastful words from his arrogant heart, the Lord will strike him down, along with everything he boasted in.

The Promised King is different. He does not come from a lofty forest; he emerges from a dead stump. In fact, in we learn that no one will believe that this is God’s Servant because:

...he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.⁴

God’s promised King would not possess the kind of majesty that the world desires and celebrates. He would be so full of sadness and so absent of worldly beauty that people would assume he could not be God’s King. But that’s what he is: **He is God’s King.**

In verse 2, we read that “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.” Just as the Spirit of God empowered Israel’s Judges and Kings in the past, God’s Spirit will rest upon this King. The Spirit ensures all the qualities necessary for a godly king.

“The Spirit of wisdom and understanding.” He will possess the cognitive abilities and discernment necessary to make decisions that bless the nation.

“The Spirit of counsel and might.” He won’t just be able to discern what is right and best, he is able to enact it. He has the might to make it happen.

“The Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” A wise and powerful leader is not a blessing if he is evil. But this King will know and fear the Lord.

How does this apply to us today?

We should believe that this promise is fulfilled in Jesus. As the New Testament opens, Jesus is born from the lineage of Jesse. After his baptism, “the Spirit of God descend[s] like a dove and come[s] to rest on him” The voice of God declares him to be

³ Isaiah 10:12–14

⁴ Isaiah 53

his Son—the King.⁵

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is the humble King who brings salvation through judgment. He is cut down by God’s wrath for the sins of the people. But, he rises from the dead, bringing forgiveness and resurrection to all who hope in him. **We should trust that Jesus is God’s King, the kind of ruler we truly need.**

Question 2 — How will this King reign?

This King enjoys living before God. “His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.” It makes King Jesus very happy to live his entire life before God the Father.

What does that look like for a King to enjoy living before God? It means he establishes justice. In the ancient Near East an “ideal king” was depicted as establishing a just society. Scripture tells us that God appoints governmental authorities for the purpose of upholding justice. But in his opening indictment of Israel, the Lord says:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.⁶

But this is what Israel’s leaders failed to do:

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.
They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.⁷

They did not establish justice. They loved bribes and accepted gifts.

But God’s King **“shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear.”** He is not deceived or persuaded by appearances; he looks on the heart of things. He is not prejudiced or persuaded by human power, money, success, or relationships.

“But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” The poor and the meek are those who lack the power and influence to defend themselves, making them easy targets for exploitation and neglect. Israel’s Law emphasized protection of such people. But Israel’s leaders failed at this:

The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people:
“It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses.

⁵ Matthew 3:17; Psalm 2

⁶ Isaiah 1:16-17

⁷ Isaiah 1:23

What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?”⁸

Chapter 10 opened with:

Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression,
to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!⁹

The promised king defends the weak instead of exploiting them; he protects their rights instead of trampling on them. More than that: “...**he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.**” So powerful is his decree, that he speaks and it is done.

“Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.” This king is not clothed in the self-glorifying garb of earthly kings. He is clothed with the character of God himself—covenant faithfulness. He has strapped on righteousness and faithfulness as one who is ready to run in these paths. He is prepared and ready to keep covenant, to do the will of the Lord.

What application might we take from this?

Hope in the reign of this King. We are in the midst of a US campaign season, with a thousand hot-button political issues swirling. And every political opinion—from the far-right to the far-left—claims that it is concerned with justice. In every coffee shop and living room, hair salon and barber shop, you can find people who know exactly what needs to be done to solve our problems. And while the debates are valuable and the issues important—every election cycle brings the sobering reminder that the issues of a just society still remain. No one has solved them. No one has ever ended injustice. But there is a King who will—his name is Jesus.

Be conformed to the image the King. We should care about what the King cares about. We should delight to live before God so that we defend, care for, and welcome the weak and easily oppressed. In James 2, we learn that when we show preference to the wealthy, powerful, and attractive in the local church, we have “become judges with evil thoughts” who “are committing sin and are convicted by the law.” We prove that our faith is worthless and dead, no matter how orthodox it may be on paper. Religion that is pure and undefiled in the sight of God is the care of the weak and vulnerable in their distress.

Can you imagine such a Kingdom? What would it be like?

Question 3 — What will his Kingdom be like?

In verses 6-9, Isaiah paints a picture of paradise.

⁸ Isaiah 3:14–15

⁹ Isaiah 10:1-2

His reign removes hostility (6a).

**“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together...”**

Those who were formerly hostile dwell in peace. There will be no predator and prey, only harmony and friendship between former enemies.

His reign restores proper human dominion (6b). “A little child shall lead them.”

Notice: it is a human leading these animals. God created humans to subdue and exercise dominion over “every living thing that moves on the earth.” Here it is fulfilled in perfection—the beasts prove no threat to the human, nor the human to the beasts.

His reign transforms nature (7). “The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” Evidently the (presently) natural desire to eat meat is removed. The bear doesn’t see the cow as hamburger, but shares a salad with it. The lion is an herbivore. This appears to be a permanent state, as it is passed along generationally with their young lying down together in the same sort of harmony.

His reign removes and reverses the curse (8). Imagine looking out the window and seeing your toddler trying to pick up a cobra. You’d panic! But in his kingdom: **“The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.”**

It is a child—the offspring of a woman—who plays near a serpent. In Genesis 3, the Lord told the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring.” There would be war between this child of the woman and the serpent, and though the child would endure a lethal strike to his heel, he would crush the serpent’s head. Evidently, in this Kingdom, the victory has been won and the enmity has ended.

He restores Eden (9a). “They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.”

Mountains, such as Eden, Sinai, and Zion, were places where God met and dwelled with his people. His Kingdom will be a “holy mountain”—a New (and Improved) Eden.

He extends Eden over all the earth (9b). Adam and Eve began in a Garden in Eden—a place that God subdued and made fruitful for them. But their great commission was to “fill the earth and subdue it.” The Garden was to be extended over the face of all the earth. And look what this King does—**“the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”** He transforms the earth so that it becomes his kingdom everywhere.

What applications can we take from this?

Look toward the end and persevere in hope. Jesus the King has appeared. He has

removed the curse through his death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead. The Resurrected King—imperishable and immortal—is the firstfruits of the Kingdom, a picture of what everything raised in him shall be. One day, the King will return. He will raise us from the dead, and as Paul writes:

When this corruptible body is clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body is clothed with immortality, then the saying that is written will take place:

Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, death, is your victory?

Where, death, is your sting?

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.¹⁰

No matter what this world throws at you, no matter what battles you fight, remember the promise of resurrection. Be steadfast and immovable. Abound in the Lord's work. It is not in vain. For no matter what the world takes from us, it cannot remove the blessed hope we have:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."¹¹

This is a glorious promise, so we ask, "How do I get in!?"

Question 4 — Who is welcome in his Kingdom?

Isaiah writes, "**In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.**" A 'signal' was a banner that told troops where to rally. This King—"the root of Jesse"—is the signal, not merely for Israel but for the "nations."

Anyone who hears about King Jesus—crucified for sin, raised from the dead, reigning at God's right hand—and believes that his reign is real, and comes to him will be granted entrance to his glorious resting place.

So here, this morning, on this table are symbols of his triumph—a broken body and

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:54–58

¹¹ Revelation 21:1–5

shed blood, given for the forgiveness of sins so that all who eat and drink of him through faith might be transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of the beloved Son.