



Sermon Transcript December 27, 2020

Hindsight is 20/20 Looking Onward Isaiah 9:6; 11:1-10

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 27, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Isaiah 9:6

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 11:1-10

¹ There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. ² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. ⁶ 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; and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. ¹⁰ 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.

Introduction

During this Advent Season, we have been looking back on this past year and at some of the lessons the year 2020 has taught us. We are calling this series *Hindsight is 20/20*. As we look back on this year, we are looking at this past year through the lens of Isaiah 9:6. *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* If hindsight is seeing something more clearly now than what we saw in the past, then my hope and prayer for us is that after this difficult year, we would see Jesus—the *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*—more clearly at the close of this year than we did when 2020 began.

The first thing I have learned from this past year is that even though it has been a tough year, it has not been a wasted year. It is not a year that has to be shrouded with a black cloth. Instead, I can **look forward** with hope because Jesus—the Wonderful Counselor—is taking all these things, judgment and salvation, and he is accomplishing his good purposes. Through the difficulties of 2020, he is bringing about renewal in us as individuals, in the church and in this broken world. God makes things new.

The second thing I am learning through 2020 is that I can trust God. Let's face it, everything else we tend to trust has been shaken to its core this year. Our health, our wealth, our democracy, our civility, our environment . . . have all been shaken to the core forcing us to ask, “where is my trust?” I have learned that I can **look upward** with confidence and put my trust in Jesus—the *Mighty God*. He is able to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. As Dave reminded us at the end of his sermon two weeks ago, “What a mighty God we serve!” We do not need to be afraid. Our trust is in God.

Last week, Michael Distefano taught us that God's answer to the darkness of this world is a family. God is forming a forever family and we are brought into the love of God's family through Jesus. The hope of this world comes to us in a son who is born. Isaiah calls Jesus the “Everlasting Father” who brings us into the love of the holy Trinity. And so the lesson I am learning in this very divided and contentious year that we are still enduring is that my greatest calling is to **look outward** with the same inviting love Jesus extended to us while we were still sinners, enemies of God and lost. After all, that is how we demonstrate we belong to Jesus. Perhaps, through all the divisions of this year, we are experiencing our greatest test of our faith. John writes, *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”*

I would like to share with you how I came upon the final lesson I have learned through the challenges of this past year. I have been thinking about this sermon series since the beginning of September. In the middle of September, Bonnie and I spent a weekend on the Northshore of Boston, helping our son and his wife move into their new home. While we were there, we happened to be staying overnight at the home of a young lady who grew up in the church I pastored outside of Philadelphia. She was a senior in high school my final year at that church. She went to Gordon College and remained in that area. Our paths have crossed again because our son and his wife are members of the church she has been involved in for all these years. Our friend rents out a room to a girl who is a seminary student at Gordon Conwell. While we were there, the idea of this sermon series came up in conversation because we were talking about the challenging year we all were enduring. When the seminary student shared with me the lesson she was learning this year, I looked at her and said, “I’m going to use that in my sermon series!” So here it is.

Like many of us, in the early stages of the pandemic, she anticipated that things would get back to normal within a month or two, if not even within a few weeks. But as you know, weeks turned into months and months will soon turn into a year. We did have a glimmer of hope when we went from Phase 1 to Phase 2 and then to Phase 3 of opening things up. But Phase 3 has now gone back to Phase 2.1 and we are yet to make it past Phase 3. She said that these unfulfilled longings of returning to normal reminded her that we will never experience the kind of peace and wholeness that our hearts long for until Jesus comes back and restores all things in a fully renewed creation—the New Earth and the New Heaven. So the lesson I was learning through our conversation is that our journey of faith calls us to **look onward** with hope and expectation as we wait for that day when Jesus restores all that is broken and fallen.

Perhaps you found it odd that we lit the candles of the Advent wreath this morning. The season of waiting for the arrival of this promised child has come and gone. That is true. But we still find ourselves waiting, don’t we? Caroline Cobb put it this way, “Advent is a season set aside for waiting and watching, longing and looking for the Messiah . . . counting down the days until Christ’s arrival with expectancy and hope. But even as we celebrate Christ’s first arrival, we watch and ache for his promised second coming, when God will dwell with us forever and everything fractured will be made new.”¹ And so we **look onward** to that promised day.

Christopher Ash wrote an article with a title that caught my attention: “3 Dangers of a Successful Vaccine.” This article was not an “anti-vaccine” article. He was very

excited about the prospect of the vaccine and was eager to get it. But what he was warning against was a false sense of security in the vaccine which might cause us to think that the vaccine will make us “safe.” To which he says, “What dangerous nonsense! Of course we won’t be safe.”² Sure, the vaccine will help protect us from this virus. But our ultimate security and safety from God’s judgment is Jesus. He adds, “Only the death and resurrection of Christ can bring the wonderful assurance that *‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’*”³ We are able to **look onward** with hope because standing ahead of us is the *Prince of Peace*.

This picture of future hope emerges from an unlikely source. Isaiah 11:1 tells us that our hope emerges from a stump. Isaiah writes, *“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.”* This opening verse gives us a picture of our hope by telling us that this stump has a *shoot*, a *root* and it will *bear fruit*. *“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.”* This is what allows us to **look onward** with hope. When all hope seems lost, God brings life from the dead. **Look onward** with me this morning as we look into Isaiah 11:1-10.

Look Onward! There is a Shoot

Isaiah begins by calling us to look onward with hope! There is a shoot coming from the stump and that shoot becomes a Branch. We are told in Isaiah 11:1 that there is a branch coming from the stump of Jesse. Who is Jesse? Jesse is the father of King David. When David became king of Israel, he was the first in a royal dynasty that lasted for 400 years. There were 20 kings, descendants of David, who sat on his throne in Jerusalem until Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. But after Jerusalem fell to Babylon and the people were taken into captivity, they never had a king again. In other words, after the tree of Judah was cut down and left to be a stump, no king assumed the throne. There wasn’t even a throne to be had. This poses a problem, because in 2 Samuel 7, God had promised David that he would have an heir who would reign on David’s throne and that David’s kingdom would last forever. But now all you see is a stump. All hope seems lost.

What will God do about the promise he made to David? The stump of Jesse assures us that God has not forgotten his promise. The living branch is a testament that there is still a king from the line of David who is yet to come. Even after all this judgment and even though the tree of Israel has been cut down to a stump, there is hope. On that stump, a Branch has sprung. There is a sign of life. Things may look bleak at the moment. But there is still hope. The Branch will bear fruit and God will establish his

kingdom through an heir of David. God will make all things new through a son of David. The forest will flourish again because of this one stump.

It is no accident, as you fast forward 700 years from the time this vision of Jesse's stump was written that you come to the first verse of the New Testament—Matthew 1:1. What do we read there? *“A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.”* The connection of Jesus to David is far from an incidental statement. The Shoot has sprung! The Branch has been born! Hope has come! The son of Jesse has arrived! A song sung this time of year rehearses this truth. “Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung! Of Jesse's lineage coming, as men of old have sung. . . Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind; with Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind. To show God's love aright, she bore to men a Savior, when half spent was the night.”

God brings hope to this world through the promised son of David. Hope comes to this world through a king. But what kind of a king is he? I would submit to you that this king is no ordinary king. See, this king is humble. In Isaiah 9:6 the hope of the world is described as a child. And, of course, when we read of the birth of Christ, the entire story is marked by signs of humility. This Savior of the world is born to a lowly handmaid by the name of Mary. His earthly father is a carpenter. He is born in a stable, surrounded by animals, out in the cool of the night. His crib is a feeding trough and he is swaddled in cloths. The announcement of the birth of the Savior, this long awaited royal son of David, is made to lowly shepherds out guarding their sheep. The hope of this world is found in a humble king. And then in this passage, the hope that is to come is described for us as a little shoot growing from the stump of Jesse. Here is what Isaiah is saying to the people of Judah when he wrote this prophetic statement. He says to them in essence, “You turned to mighty Assyria because man tends to be enamored with signs of strength and power.” And then he says, “Do you know where your real hope lies? It lies in that little, ‘itty-bitty’ shoot over there.” That is it? That is it!

This picture of the Branch prepares us for the kind of king who will change our lives and change our world. He is a humble king. “Humble king” sounds like an oxymoron. You tend not to find those two words going hand in hand. In Deuteronomy 17, God gave instructions to Israel as to what to look for in a future king. Kings have a tendency to take things for themselves. God warns against having a king who accumulates many horses and many wives and great amounts of gold and silver for himself. Because in doing so, “his heart will be led astray.” Even David, the cream of the crop, fell prey to the power of the throne. By kingly right, he took someone else's wife for himself.

In Deuteronomy 17 there are instructions given for the king. These instructions are designed to keep the king humble. Moses writes, *“When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.”* This king is to keep the law of God before him and he is to make his own hand written copy it, reading it all the days of his life. Why? So that he stays humble before God and his fellow man. It is so that he will be filled with wisdom and so that he will rule with justice and righteousness. (That is a good challenge for us as we begin a new year. The key to being humble is to delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night.) Is this not the kind of leader we long for in this world? Do you not long for a leader who is humble and wise and just and righteous? Do you not long for a leader who cares for the people? That is exactly the kind of king we find in Jesus. The humble Branch is the very one in whom we can put our hope.

Notice how Jesus is described in verses 2-3. *“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.”* This is what Moses was talking about in Deuteronomy 17. It is because of his character, the humble and the needy will be exalted and cared for. In the Westminster Confession of Faith it describes the kingly function of Jesus as one who is “ruling and defending his people.” He is always thinking about the well being of his people.

See, here is the reality. God has every right to take out the axe and cut down your tree. Like every other person, you have the marks of pride in your life. You have raised your fist in defiance of God and have sought to live life apart from your Creator. You have sinned against God. “He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone.” You have sought for security in other things than the humble branch of Jesse.

But there is a humble king who has come. When Isaiah wrote down this prophetic statement about the Branch coming from the stump of Jesse, it was a long time before it would ever become a reality. But here we are, on the other side of that prophetic statement. We have seen the day when Christ was born. But when we look at this humble twig, we see more than a humble twig. We see another tree. We see the cross of Calvary. We see the ultimate picture of the humility of our King. He took the brunt of the axe of God’s judgment reserved for us, and as our substitute, he died for our

rebellion. When Jesus died, his disciples thought it was all over. They just saw a stump. But there was a Branch on that fallen stump, for Jesus rose from the dead. He won the victory over our sin and over death through his humility. **Look onward!** There is a shoot that comes from Jesse's stump. When all hope seems lost, God brings life from the dead. When we **look onward** we see a *Prince* who has come. We see Jesus.

Look Onward! There is Fruit

Part of the hope of Isaiah 11 is that this shoot grows into a branch and the branch bears fruit. In other words, this tender shoot grows into a wonderful tree. In fact, you could say that this is the nicest Christmas tree you ever saw. It starts out looking worse than Charlie Browns Christmas tree—a stump with a little shoot—but it grows into a fruitful tree. It is like the parable of the kingdom of God that Jesus shared in Matthew 13. He likened the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. *“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”* The branch may not be much to look at in Isaiah 11:1—or even today. But look what it grows into in Isaiah 11:6-9.

In Isaiah 11:6-9 we read about the kind of fruit that comes from this Branch. It is a kingdom of peace. Biblical peace is not just the absence of strife. It is something far greater than that. Peace is the restoring of what is broken. It is taking all that is fractured in this world and making it new. Alec Motyer says of Jesus as the *Prince of Peace* brings a peace that makes us “at one with God and with humankind.”⁴ Through Jesus this fractured world will be made whole. And by virtue of being the *Prince* these “are the benefits Jesus administers to his people.”⁵

Look at the fruit—the wholeness—the restorative peace—that comes from this Branch. Where there was once nothing but stumps, we find a vibrant and fully restored earth. We read, *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; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.*

How nice is the tree looking now? The phrase we hear repeated often this time of year is “Peace on earth, good will to man.” And yet, don't you relate to the Christmas carol: “And in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth I said. For hate is strong

and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to man.” At times the kingdom of God seems rather insignificant. But look at the branch! There is fruit! The carol affirms this when it concludes, “Then peel the bells more loud and deep, God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to man.” No more hurting or harming, no more violence or death. Man and beast dwelling in harmony. A return to the Garden, and then some. Paradise restored. This peaceable kingdom is the fruit that the shoot of Jesse will bring. Creation itself will be brought back in order. Life will be lived the way it was meant to be, “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” Someday, it will all be restored.

I am particularly drawn to the picture of infant playing by the hole of the cobra and the child putting his hand in the viper’s nest. If you remember, it was the serpent who tempted Eve to sin. As a result, there was enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman. The serpent is obviously Satan. We are born into this world as slaves to Satan and sin and death. So there is coming a day, where not even the poison of Satan and sin will harm us anymore. How so? *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.* Jesus the King will finally put an end to all that is evil and wrong. God will restore all that was once lost in the fall. There is coming a day when there will truly be peace on earth. I am ready, how about you? Come Lord Jesus!

It is exciting to think about. I wonder what it will be like. There will not be a corner of that New Creation that won’t be changed. There is a great scene in C. S. Lewis’s book *The Magicians Nephew*. This book is part of the *Chronicles of Narnia* series. In it Aslan declares Frank, a cabbie on Earth, King of Narnia. Narnia has talking animals and these animals make crowns for the king and his queen and they express delight in being ruled by these humans. One of the animals in attendance is a horse named Strawberry, who drew Frank’s carriage in London. He toiled daily for his master, and sometimes Frank, who was a good man, whipped Strawberry to make him move faster. When Aslan crowns Frank as king, Strawberry marvels at the change in his master. He says, “My old master’s been changed nearly as much as I have. Why, he’s a real master now.” That is the peace that comes with the kingdom of peace. We will be fully restored with all of creation. We will be whole!

God brings hope by bringing about a peaceful and restored kingdom where everything will be made right. We **look onward** with hope and expectation as we wait for that day when Jesus restores all that is broken and fallen. As the ancients waited in anticipation for the first Advent, that lowly Branch, we too wait for that second Advent when the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords will return and restore all things to himself.

Look Onward! There is a Root

There is one more thing for us to see as we **look onward**. This final thing that Isaiah shows us is what allows us to **look onward** with great confidence and true hope. In verse 10, the shoot is also the root. *“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.”*

First of all, the fact that the shoot is coming from the stump of Jesse tells us that not only is Jesus a descendant of David, but he is a new and better David. There will be no “mess up” with this king like there was with David and David’s lineage and kingdom. This kingdom will be eternal. How can we be sure of that. It is because not only does this king—Jesus—come from Jesse, the stump. But Jesse comes from *the root*. In other words, this shoot is also the eternal root, the Son of God. That is what John the Baptist said of Jesus in John 1:30. *“After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.”* Earlier he opened up his gospel account by saying of Jesus, *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* The shoot of Jesse’s stump, the descendent of David, is also the divine Son of God. Listen to what Jesus says at the end of Revelation, Revelation 22:16. *“I am the root and the descendant (the shoot) of David, the bright morning star.”*

And so Jesus said of his kingdom with great confidence, *the gates of hell will not prevail against it*. Actually, right not, I am looking at the Jesse tree. The Jesse tree is God’s people who have humbly turned to Christ by faith. In verse 10 Jesus is referred to as a “banner.” Isaiah says, *“In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples.”* A banner is a standard that is erected in a conspicuous place for communicating important information. It is kind of like that famous picture we have from World War II, when the soldiers from Easy Company planted the flag on Iwo Jima after four days of fighting and 40 percent losses. It signaled the tide of the battle had turned. It was a rallying point and a symbol of victory.

So it is with Jesus. In verse 10 we find that when we lift Jesus up to be seen by others, people rally to him. The tree continues to grow. Paul quotes verse 10 in Romans 15:12 to describe the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. He says, *“The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.”* As Jesus is lifted up, the tree continues to grow. Are you at peace with God? The *Prince of Peace* has come and died for you sin and rose again from the dead so that you can be made

whole—your relationship with God restored. A lasting kingdom of peace awaits those who turn in faith to Jesus.

And so out of the struggle of 2020 we **look onward** with real hope. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 11 right after he alludes to Isaiah 11. It is a blessing that should fill our hearts of our eyes are on the shoot and the root of Jesse—Jesus. Even if 2021 is a lot like 2020, or even worse, we can be filled with hope. Paul says this: *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”* **Look onward!** There is a shoot—a new David. **Look onward!** There is fruit—a lasting kingdom of peace. **Look onward!** The shoot is also the root—the son of David is the Son of God. And so our hope is not wishful thinking. It is sure!

Hindsight is 2020

As you transition into 2021, which will have its own trouble, do so with great hope.

Look forward and see that God is using all these things to make do renew you.
Look upward and do not be afraid. You can trust God. What a mighty God we serve.
Look outward and excel at extending the love of God to others as God has loved you.
Look onward and be filled with hope because Jesus is coming again and even now he is drawing people to himself. Lord, use us to lift Jesus high in 2021 and use us to bring people into your kingdom that they may be made whole, knowing peace and hope.

¹Caroline Cobb “2020 Has Felt Like Advent All Year” www.thegospelcoalition.org Nov, 23, 2020

²Christopher Ash “3 Dangers of a Successful Vaccine” www.thegospelcoalition.org Dec. 11, 2020

³Ibid

⁴Alec Motyer *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 103

⁵Ibid., 103

