

Christmas Foretold

Isaiah 11:1-5

December 22, 2019

Today, we're going to travel back in history.¹ Way, way back to a time when the prophets were just barely beginning to even dream about Christmas. Although, of course, they wouldn't have called it Christmas. And they never would have anticipated that things would unfold quite the way that they did. As a matter of fact, much of what you and I know today through hindsight, was a mystery to the prophets. 1 Peter 1:10-11 tells us that, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow."² In other words, the prophets longed to know what you and I can know today. All throughout human history, mankind has been given various glimpses of God's plan for us. Jesus, the promised Messiah, has been foreshadowed and foretold over and over again. Sometimes in quite startling and obvious ways, and other times in more subtle ways.

Let's look back together today and let's marvel at God's gracious plan of redemption. A plan that has been unfolding for thousands of years. Many years before that first Christmas, God was laying out the groundwork well in advance. God was orchestrating world events to suit His own purposes. He was doing this for His own glory, AND for His own purposes in redeeming mankind from sin. He was giving early signals of His plan to set up a kingdom that would be like no other kingdom before.

Please open up your Bible to Isaiah 11:1. Today, we're going to jump back in history to Isaiah 11. Here we'll discover an important thread in the beautiful tapestry of God's redemptive plan.³ Some 2,700 years ago, God was at work. He was intentionally weaving together the threads necessary to accomplish His plan to rescue His people.

1. Isaiah foretold that a Branch would come from the stump of Jesse. Isaiah 11:1 begins, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." In order to truly appreciate what verse 1 is talking about, it helps to picture a stump. It's not a full tree, just a stump. Just the remnant of a tree that's been cut down. Isaiah was written at a time in history when the nation of Israel had suffered greatly under the attacks of the Assyrians. The northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. And now the southern kingdom, Judah, was under heavy attack. Although the southern kingdom ended up narrowly surviving this attack by the Assyrians, Isaiah warns them that the Babylonians are coming next. And Isaiah predicts that they will NOT survive their attack. History records for us, that Isaiah's prediction was deadly accurate. So as we read Isaiah 11:1, we need to understand that the reference to this stump is a reference to the impending doom of the southern kingdom. Judah would eventually be cut down by the Babylonians. All that would be left of the nation of Israel would be the remnant of this stump. God, through His grace and goodness, had Isaiah write about the stump so that His people would not lose all hope. Even though things were headed toward some very dire circumstances, even though God's people were about to be taken away into Babylonian exile, there was hope.



¹ In many ways, our sermon series for this year's Advent season has been going in reverse. We began out into the future and then we've been moving progressively backwards through history. We began with the first advent candle that speaks to Jesus' royalty. And we fast-forwarded way into the future, to Jesus' glorious return. Then Pastor Micah backtracked us in history some 2,000 years into the past. He talked about how Jesus came to earth as a humble human baby, on that very first Christmas. Last Sunday, we traveled backwards yet another 500 years or so before that first Christmas. We talked about joy as we dug into Psalm 126. How we can reflect back on our former joy as well as look forward to the day when God will restore our joy in the future. Psalm 126 was probably written right around the time of Israel's return from the exile in Babylon. (Although I would note that it's difficult to put an exact date on many of the psalms since they were written over such a long period of time and then eventually compiled into one final collection. I talked about this more comprehensively in a sermon back on May 26, 2019 called "Creation Psalms." It can be accessed here: <https://efcbemidji.org/watch-read/sermons/sermon-list/>)

² See 2 Peter 1:19-21.

³ As Christ-followers today, we are blessed to have the gift of hindsight. In other words, we are able to look back and see many more pieces in God's puzzling timeline of redemption.

The stump of Jesse was an image of hope. The remnants of a once mighty tree, was not much to look at. And yet, there was hope in that stump. Hope that the roots below were still intact. Hope that there would still be enough left in those roots to support new life. Enough for a shoot to come up. A shoot that would grow into a Branch that would bear fruit. This wasn't just a promise that the nation of Israel would return to its land again. Nor was it just a promise that the nation would be revitalized and grow again. It was a promise of something much, much greater; it was a promise of a branch. Not just any branch though; it was THE Branch, Branch with a capital "B." The "stump of Jesse" is a reference to Jesse, the father of King David.⁴ There was hope in Jesse's lineage because God had promised his son, King David, that one of his descendants would always sit on the throne. You see, Isaiah 11 is about "The establishment of the Davidic king and his kingdom."⁵ And the word "Branch" is capitalized because it is referring to none other than Jesus Christ and to His everlasting kingdom. This is why something as seemingly mundane as a stump, engendered such hope for God's people.⁶ This wasn't just any stump, this was the stump of Jesse.



Isaiah 11:2-5 goes on to describe King Jesus and to describe what His kingdom rule will look like.⁷ After verse 5, Isaiah then describes some details regarding the final consummation of Jesus' kingdom. This description is beautiful, but it has not yet been realized. The timing of Jesus' kingdom can be a little confusing. And here's an important thing to keep in mind as we learn about Jesus' Kingdom: it comes in various phases. In other words, Jesus' kingdom was inaugurated during Jesus' 1st coming, but it will only be fully consummated later, at His 2nd coming. THAT is when we will see the final fulfillment of things like the picture in verse 6 where "the wolf will live with the lamb."⁸ That's the time when we will enjoy the incredible reality of verse 9 when, "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD."

Jesus' kingdom comes in stages.⁹ So we see that, on that very first Christmas, Jesus was born as a humble king. But then this king grew up and had a public ministry here on earth, through which He taught us about His kingdom, with teachings like the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' public ministry revealed his kingly power to rule over nature, over sickness, and over demons and the like. Jesus then died on the cross and was raised again which proved that His kingdom is an eternal kingdom. And Jesus promises to return a second time to fully establish His kingdom reign. That's what Isaiah 11:6 and the verses following, are alluding to. But before the Bible ever gets to Jesus' birth or to any of these other stages of His kingdom, Jesus' coming Kingdom is predicted by Isaiah and by many other prophets as well. In fact...

2. Christmas was foretold all throughout the Old Testament. When our kids were younger, my wife Debbie and I enjoyed going through a Christmas devotional with them called, "The Advent Jesse Tree." It's written by a woman named Dean Lambert.¹⁰ Have you read it? It's a nice little book that lays out 25 devotional thoughts leading up to Christmas. Day 1 begins with the creation of the world and then it traces all the way through key some historical events, right up to Day 25 with the birth of Jesus. What's particularly enjoyable about doing this devotional with your kids is that each of the 25 days is connected to a different symbol or object lesson. So each day one of our kids would unwrap a small present with something like an apple inside (or a picture of an apple). Then we would talk about what that object had to do with Jesus. We had a little tree, about 2 feet tall, where we would hang

⁴ Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13. Note that David wasn't even invited to the sacrifice like all of his other brothers. See verses 5 and 11.

⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1115.

⁶ As a matter of fact, the stump of Jesse still brings hope to you and me today. We are reminded of this hope in places like the genealogy from Matthew 1 and Revelation 5:5 and 22:16. Romans 15:11-13 calls out to us: "...Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

⁷ Verse 2 says "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him..." 1 Samuel 16:13 talks about King David in similar terms, "...the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David..." See also Isaiah 61:1-2 and Jesus' quotation of it in Luke 4:16-21.

⁸ See Isaiah 65:25 and its preceding context. "The peace and safety of the Messianic age... are a description of the future consummation of [Jesus' rule and reign on earth]." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1133.

⁹ "The final climactic burst, the consummation, lies ahead; meanwhile, the inauguration of the kingdom" already began during Jesus' first coming. See D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, Repackaged ed. 2018, p. 337. Carson also lays out an overview of the kingdom stages on the top of p. 347.

¹⁰ Dean Lambert, *The Advent Jesse Tree*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1988.

these objects each day. So, by Day 25, our tree would be covered in 25 different objects or pictures that reminded us of how Christmas was foretold throughout the Bible. This Jesse Tree was a great way for our family to prepare for Christmas together each year. And, it was an annual reminder that Christmas had been foretold all throughout the Old Testament.

Let me share just a few examples of how Christmas is foretold through the symbols from *The Advent Jesse Tree*: The symbol for Day 1 is a globe or a picture of the earth (some families use the image of a sun). This reminds us that Jesus is eternal and that He was there in the Trinity when the world was first created.¹¹ The symbol for Day 2 is an apple (preferably w/ a snake on it). This reminds us not only about HOW our sin problem began, but also about Genesis 3:15, which says that Adam/Eve's offspring would crush the serpent's head. This was later fulfilled in Jesus' victory over Satan.¹² The symbol for Day 3 is an ark with a rainbow. Noah and the flood remind us that the wages of mankind's sin and rebellion is death. But the ark was the means by which God would save those who placed their faith in Him. 1 Peter 3:21 later explains that this water now symbolizes our baptism into Christ, which saves us through His death/burial/resurrection.



The symbols for Days 4-9 remind us of how God established His covenant with His chosen people, the Jews. So we find symbols like the ram that God provided for the sacrifice in place Abraham's son Isaac.¹³ We find symbols like the ladder that God showed to Jacob, when He revealed to Him that through his offspring, all of the peoples on the earth would be blessed.¹⁴ Each of these symbols point to Jesus, the coming Messianic King, who would fulfill these prophecies. The Jesse Tree goes on with a coat of many colors, with a tablet containing ten numbers, and with a cluster of grapes boasting of the good food in the Promised Land.

The next collection of symbols includes a sheaf of wheat to remind us of the story of Ruth and Boaz, her Kinsman Redeemer. There's also a slingshot and then a scroll and then a stump. We've talked about this stump quit a bit already today. This is where the Jesse Tree gets its name, "the stump of Jesse," from Isaiah 11. The symbols continue with everything from a shepherd's staff, to a heart with writing on it, to a Bethlehem Star. The culmination in the last few days wraps up with the symbols of a candle representing Jesus as the light of the world, with an angel who proclaims the Good News, and then with a baby lying in a manger. I'm sure we all get the idea by now. But, to really understand and fully appreciate the beauty and power of each of these symbols, we'd need to take time and thoroughly read each story. What we'd find, when we did this, is an incredible forecasting of God's redemptive plan for mankind.¹⁵ An Advent devotional like the Jesse Tree is a helpful reminder that "The plan of salvation did not start with the birth of a tiny baby."¹⁶ It began MUCH earlier!

As I mentioned earlier, all throughout human history, mankind has been given various glimpses of God's plan for us. Jesus, the promised Messiah, has been foreshadowed and foretold over and over again. Sometimes in quite startling and obvious ways, and other times in more subtle ways. What this suggests for anyone reading this transcript is that...

3. Christmas is a time for us to believe and to rejoice in what was foretold. It's amazing how slow we can be to believe. In fact, even when Jesus was standing right in front of people's eyes, many of them resisted Him. Even after Jesus came in the flesh and fulfilled SO many prophecies from the Old Testament. Even after He lived out a godly life right in front of them, during all of His days on earth. Even after He had taught them from the Scriptures for years. And even after He died and rose again, many people were STILL, slow to believe. We see a blatant example of this in Luke 24. Shortly after Jesus' death/resurrection, two men were walking along a road that led to a village called

¹¹ See John 1:2-3.

¹² See also Romans 16:20.

¹³ Genesis 22:1-14.

¹⁴ Genesis 28:10-17.

¹⁵ Consider Ephesians 1:3-14.

¹⁶ Dean Lambert, *The Advent Jesse Tree*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1988, p. 8.

Emmaus. Jesus, the risen Christ Himself, walked up right beside them. Now admittedly, these two men were kept from recognizing Him at first. But, as they talked with Jesus, they expressed their uncertainty. In Luke 24:21 they say, "...we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel..." We had HOPED that He (that is, Jesus) was the one! In other words, despite all the evidence that they had compiled and after all the teaching that they had received in person, directly from Jesus, they were STILL unconvinced. They were SLOW to believe.¹⁷

Look at what Jesus says to them in Luke 24:25, "He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" Now, isn't that interesting? Jesus doesn't even mention His own previous three years of teaching them. Instead, he refers to what the prophets had spoken hundreds of years earlier. And then, Luke 24:27 says, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Here, "Scriptures" refers only to the Old Testament. The New Testament hadn't even begun to be written. Jesus begins with MOSES! Moses who had lived some 1,400 years before Jesus even came to earth! In other words, Jesus declared that their access to the OT Scriptures should have been enough. In fact, it should have been more than enough for them to determine that Jesus was indeed who He said He was.¹⁸ Today, you and I have access not only to the Old Testament but also to the New Testament. As of the year 2019, the truth about Jesus has been written down for us in the Bible for thousands of years. And yet, here some of us are, SLOW to believe. Some of us are still resisting and denying the truth that is right under our noses.

How about you? After thinking through some of the history that foretold the coming of Jesus, and after recognizing the many promises that have been fulfilled through Christ, have you made up your mind about Him? What is holding you back from believing the truth of Christmas?¹⁹ Today we have so many more pieces to the puzzle. More than the prophets of old ever had. Today we can track through centuries of history to see how this beautiful tapestry of God's plan has been woven together. The picture is clearer today than it has ever been before.²⁰ Why not admit the truth that's plain to see? Jesus Christ is the Branch from the stump of Jesse. He is the One foretold in the OT book of Isaiah. And foretold by many other prophets as well. Let this Christmas be the Christmas when you worship God not just out of holiday tradition or out of empty ritual, but let your worship stem from genuine belief. The Christmas Story is true. Let's rejoice in what was foretold!

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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¹⁷ And I guess this shouldn't surprise us. It's in our human nature to question and doubt. Especially as adults, we aren't quick to sign up for something that will demand our full faith and devotion.

¹⁸ It's encouraging to read Luke 24:34.

¹⁹ The fact is, each one of us needs God to give us the faith that we need to believe. No amount of facts or proof or evidence can change our human hearts. Only God can.

²⁰ Consider Matthew 11:20-24.