

Knowing the Lord

Isaiah 11:1-10

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What is your greatest hope as you approach this Christmas? Our hopes change as we grow, don't they? As children, we hope we will get the toy or game that we want. You may still hope to get a certain present, but as adults we may also hope that the dinner or party we plan goes well. We may hope that our family will be able to get together. We may hope that loved ones who are ill may get better. We hope that we will all find the meaning and purpose in life that God intends.

In the Bible, hope is more than just wishful thinking. It's confidence that God will keep promises, that God's purposes will get worked out, that one day God's will and God's rule will prevail, God will reign unhindered. That kind of hope comes from knowing the Lord. The better we know God, the more hopeful we become.

Think about how amazing it is that the infinite, awesome, majestic Creator and Lord of the universe can be known by us finite, limited, sinful people. We can know God because God makes himself known. God has given us minds to think and reason, but we don't reason our way to God. God reveals and makes known who God is and what we need to know and experience to relate to God. We respond to God's revelation with faith and then faith seeks understanding. But knowing the Lord is more than knowing things about God—it's acknowledging God as the Lord and being in relationship with God, knowing God as we would know a friend or a parent.

"The knowledge of the Lord" is a key phrase in this passage we've read. It brackets the passage, appearing in verses 2 and 9. Isaiah is relating a vision that deals with Judah as the nation struggles with the threat of invasion by Assyria. Assyria was the major world power that had already conquered the northern kingdom, Israel. The Assyrians had taken much of Judah as well—and Jerusalem looked to be the next to be defeated. But Isaiah kept telling the king and the people to trust God.

In the midst of all that comes this portrait of an ideal king. It's really a vision of a future king and of God's future reign when the earth will be

restored to what it was in the beginning. God was going to keep the promises he made to King David, that David would always have a descendant who would rule. And God would keep many other promises made to the people that they would be able to live in the restored creation, that nature would be healed and that even predators and prey would get along.

The king of Judah at the time was Ahaz, who was a descendant of David. But the royal line of David had fallen from its previous glory. It looked like it would be completely cut off. The royal family is pictured as a tree that is cut down along with many others in the land. Isaiah is showing us a hopeless situation. Who would survive? How would they survive?

But then the prophet sees a shoot growing from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was King David's father. Part of what Isaiah was saying is that knowing the Lord brings new growth where it seems nothing can grow. Picture that old stump, with dried and gnarled roots. It seems there is no hope, no life there. Yet a sprout begins to push its way up from that stump. It grows and bears fruit. It becomes the place where all nations, all peoples, rally together.

In one place where we lived, we used to drive past an old run down farm. On that farm, near the highway, was an old run down silo that was no longer used. There are lots of silos around the countryside, but we noticed this one because it had a tree growing up in the middle of it. I've seen that happen in other places since then. Those trees don't know that trees don't grow in silos. But some seeds sprouted and put down roots and started reaching for the sunlight.

Last summer, we cut some trees and bushes down to stumps. It wasn't long before sprouts started growing out of the stumps. They will be overgrown again before we know it if we don't keep them trimmed.

Trees have a way of growing beyond what we expect. You've seen concrete sidewalks broken and pushed aside by the roots of a nearby tree that wouldn't be confined.

That's the way it is with God's Messiah, Jesus. The New Testament shows Jesus fulfilling the promises made here in the prophet's vision. Jesus

comes with a new revelation of God, making God known, making it possible for us to know God.

Isaiah spoke of a new king. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon this ruler. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God often came upon people to equip and empower them for special tasks. Here, the Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord. The Spirit of God makes knowing God real for us. The Spirit of the Lord is the source of true authority. God's Spirit gives the wisdom the king needs to make good judgments. The Spirit gives understanding, the insight required to set policy. Counsel includes forming strategy and making plans. Might, or "heroism," gives the king strength for battle. Spirit-inspired knowledge of the Lord is true understanding and right relationship to God and God's will. The fear of the Lord is awe and submission to God, the Holy One of Israel. God's Spirit would enable the new king to acknowledge the Lord and show reverent submission to God. Righteousness, fairness and faithfulness also mark the leadership of God's anointed king who is a champion of the poor and meek and who overthrows the wicked (insight on this passage from John D. W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol 24: Isaiah 1-33 and notes in *The Wesley Study Bible*).

Again, we believe Jesus fulfills this. Jesus is that kind of ruler, that kind of leader for us. And, as Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit, he gives us gifts like these to enable us to lead the way God wants us to where God calls us to.

The end of the vision is of a day when there would be no more harm or destruction where God dwells because "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." Because of the reign of God's new king, all people will acknowledge the Lord and know God and live in God's reign.

What will that look like? When will it happen? Why hasn't it happened yet? It started happening at the first coming, the first advent, of Jesus. There are hints and glimpses and pockets of its happening now. God will complete this new creation when Jesus appears again, at his second advent.

Isaiah has a vision of what is called the "peaceable kingdom." That's also the title of several paintings by Edward Hicks. One version of it is on

our bulletin cover today. Predators and prey live together in peace. Wolves won't attack and eat lambs, leopards and lions won't eat goats and cows. Instead they will all feed together. Deadly snakes won't be deadly. It's the Garden of Eden again. Creation will be restored to what God intended in the first place. Peace and righteousness will rule.

Rich Mullins was an outstanding Christian singer-songwriter. In one of his songs, he pictures God's new creation, the peaceable kingdom, the time when knowing the Lord is widespread.

I believe there is a place
Where people live in perfect peace
Where there is food on every plate
Where work is rewarded and rest is sweet
Where the color of your skin
Won't get you in or keep you out
Where justice reigns and truth finally wins
Its hard fought war against fear and doubt

...

I believe there'll come a time
Lord, I pray it's not too far off
There'll be no poverty or crime
There'll be no greed and we will learn how to love
And children will be safe in their homes
And there'll be no riots out on the streets
The old will not be left alone
And the strong will learn how to care for the weak

And everyone I know hopes it comes real soon
But when I ask them where I'd find it they seem so confused
Do I find it in the day?
Do I find it in the night?
When I finally asked the world they gave me this advice
Well they said boy you just follow your heart
But my heart just led me into my chest

They said follow your nose
But the direction changed every time I went and turned my head
And they said boy you just follow your dreams
But my dreams were only misty notions
But the Father of hearts and the Maker of noses
And the Giver of dreams He's the one I've chosen
And I will follow him.

(Rich Mullins and Beaker, "The Maker of Noses," from *The World as Best as I Can Remember It*, Vol 2; lyrics at www.kidbrothers.net/lyrcis/tmon.html, accessed 12/3/13)

There's another interesting phrase in Isaiah's vision. He says, "And a little child will lead them" (v. 6). Who is that little child? I've always seen it as kind of generic: little children or those who become like children will take the lead in God's kingdom. But I heard a suggestion this week that makes sense. *Jesus* is the little child who leads. I was talking to Nancy about this and that was her first thought.

That little child of verse 6 who leads the former eaters and the formerly eaten, that nursing child of verse 8 who is idly playing around the hole of a poisonous snake, that weaned child who is absently sticking its tiny hand into the home of the most deadly serpent, is precisely the one we anticipate this and every Christmas. For a child who can live and thrive among the most dangerous of creatures can also become a man who can live his life solely in justice and righteousness, dedicated to those who live their lives on the margins, who find themselves on the outside of the potential goodness of life. Only when that king shows up will "the earth be full of the knowledge of YHWH [Yahweh, the LORD] just like the waters cover all the world's seas" (verse 9).

Isaiah was right. We need that king. And maybe this Christmas the baby messiah may look less like a baby and more like the king Isaiah describes. (John Holbert, "The Hope of Peace: Advent Reflections on Isaiah 11:1-9,

www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Hope-of-Peace,
accessed 12/2/13)

In the NT we see Jesus as the One who is anointed by God's Spirit, the one who has the Spirit and gives the Spirit without measure (John 3:34). Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to people who trust him and receive this great gift from him. Jesus, through the Spirit, enables us to acknowledge God and know God for ourselves. In his first coming, Jesus begins to fulfill what the prophets saw. We anticipate that in his second coming, he will bring all the promises to fulfillment. When he returns, creation will be restored and renewed and healed. There will be peace. All who will remain will be his people, who know the Lord because they have received and responded to his revelation.

In the meantime, between Jesus' first and second advents, we're called to live in anticipation of that new world. We can begin to experience now the life and peace and righteousness that will come then. And somehow, our living now in light of that future helps prepare for the kingdom's fullness and may even contribute something to that new creation.

To hope for a better future in this world—for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed, for the slaves, the refugees, the hungry and homeless, for the abused, the paranoid, the downtrodden and despairing, and in fact for the whole wide, wonderful, and wounded world—is not something *else*, something extra, something tacked on to the gospel as an afterthought. And to work for that intermediate hope, the surprising hope that comes forward from God's ultimate future into God's urgent present, is not a *distraction from* the task of mission and evangelism in the present. It is a central, essential, vital, and life-giving part of it.

... What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it. ... What you *do* in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems,

caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—*will last into God's future*. (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* 192, 193)

Jesus springs up with new life. His roots are in the ancient line of King David and his branches extend over the whole earth. Jesus springs up from death in resurrection and new life.

And that's how it is with the new life God gives and the hope God gives us. It springs up in the most hopeless situations. God's new thing is rooted in God's past acts. But God can't be contained in our past experiences or our traditions or systems or ways of thinking. God is always breaking through, and inviting us to break through, into new expressions of love and grace, new experiences of God's Spirit at work, new growth and new fruit in our lives, in the church, in the world. That's part of the excitement of knowing this God of new beginnings.