

Hy 17:1-6

Yarrow, December 25, 2010

Hy 1B

Hy 15:1,2,3,4

Ps 72:10

Ps 150:1,2,3

Isaiah 8:19-9:7

2 Kings 18:1-8

Luke 2:1-7

Isaiah 9:6a – “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.”

Beloved Congregation of Jesus Christ the Lord!

We remember today the birth of Jesus Christ. Yet even as we do so, the cares and sorrows of our daily existence remain a harsh reality. Shortly, for example, we’ll leave this building and get ready to spend an afternoon with family and friends – with whom we may or may not get on so well. And next week many of us will need to return to work, with its pressures and stresses. Though Christmas is seen as the season for good will, it’s hard and cold fact that the brokenness of life remains very much a reality.

Today we also may witness the profession of faith of a young member of the congregation. Josh wishes to respond to his baptism, and that’s to say that he intends to walk with God every moment of every day. We appreciate his intent and are thankful with him for the desire the Lord has worked in his life. But Josh undoubtedly knows what we all already know: professing faith in Jesus Christ does not take the aches and pains out of life....

On this Christmas Day, then, I want to open with you the word of our God at a place where the brokenness of life stood out so starkly, at a place where the gospel of Christ’s birth stands out with equal clarity. Instead of turning to the Gospel according to Matthew or the Gospel according to Luke, I ask your attention today for the Gospel according to Isaiah. For Isaiah would tell his hearers of the glorious gospel of what Christmas is all about.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THROUGH THE BIRTH OF A CHILD GOD GIVES TO BROKEN PEOPLE A REASON TO REJOICE.

1. To whom is the child born?
2. Who is the child?
3. What does the child do?

1. To whom is the child born?

We’ve read together a few verses from Isaiah 9. These verses tell us that the words of our text form actually a happy announcement. In fact, in vs 3 it is recorded that there would be great rejoicing. Three reasons are given for that rejoicing, one in vs 4, another in vs 5, and a third reason in vs 6, and of the three, it is the last that gives the ultimate reason: rejoice, because “to us a child is born.”

One wonders: why is the birth of a child –*this* child– the ultimate reason for rejoicing? To appreciate that, we must first come to grips with the circumstances in which Isaiah uttered this prophecy. And that means in turn that we are to know to whom this child is born.

Actually, our text gives a quick answer to that question: the child is born “to us”. But who, then, is this “us”?

The prophet Isaiah did his work specifically in the city of Jerusalem. So, when he speaks about

a child being born to “us”, he refers to the people of Jerusalem, himself included. That would answer the question of our first point: this child is born to the people of Jerusalem.

But we can’t move on yet to our second point, for more needs to be said on the matter of who receives this child. The thing is that in Jerusalem numerous children were born every day; Jerusalem, after all, was a *city*. Why, then, should Jerusalem rejoice because *this* child was born? What circumstances existed in Jerusalem that the people of the city should rejoice because of the birth of *this* infant?

I draw to your attention the fact that the first 7 verses of chap 9 are part of a larger prophecy, a prophecy beginning with chap 7. As it turns out, it is important that we understand this context if we are to get to the heart of our text. Accordingly, I would invite you to have your bibles at hand as we come to grips with the context.

From chap 7:1 we learn that the king of Judah at this time was Ahaz. You’ll recall from a couple of weeks ago (and we read it again from Isaiah 7) that Ahaz was not at all a godly king; though a child of God by covenant, he did not trust his God at all. Scripture even tells us that he went so far as to sacrifice his son on an altar to a heathen god – and that’s, of course, because he wanted the favour of that heathen god.... Early in his reign, the kings of Israel and Syria combined forces to attack Jerusalem, and Ahaz’s response –so we read in Isaiah 7:2– was that “his heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind.” Ahaz was terrified, and so were the people, because the king did not rely on God.

Invariably, the king’s failure to rely on the God of Israel had consequences. According to God’s law, faith-less-ness –and hence disobedience to God– could not result in God blessing His people; faith-less-ness instead had to result in God’s punishments. The punishments spelled out by God in the Scriptures He had already given to Israel –you can read it in Deuteronomy 28– included the horrors of oppression by enemies and eventually even exile.

Ahaz had no faith in God. So, according to promise, God sent enemies to attack His people in Jerusalem. But –we learned this some weeks ago when we listened to chap 7– God in mercy promised to frustrate the enemy attacks so that they would not succeed. This was mercy, Yes. But at the same time God said that if Ahaz would not repent, something worse still would happen. Other enemies would come, the Assyrians, and the horrors of oppression afflicted by these soldiers would be far worse than what the current enemies would do (Is 7:17). In a word: if Ahaz would not repent, the future of God’s people in Judah and Jerusalem was not promising.

And see: Judah’s king did not repent; he was patently *unbelieving*. More: already the writing was on the wall, for the two most northern tribes of Israel –Zebulon and Naphtali– were already in exile, carried away. Darkness had settled over that land already.... Given the godlessness of the king of Judah, it was only a matter of time before the lights went out in Judah and Jerusalem also....

It is now in this situation that Isaiah must proclaim the gospel to the people of Jerusalem. For when Isaiah refers to Zebulon and Naphtali, he does more than issue a call for repentance; Isaiah uses the opportunity also to **announce a glorious future**. And that future is this: God will *restore* Zebulon and Naphtali, will cause a great light to shine upon the land that has dwelt in the darkness of exile. The prophet, then, in the hearing of the people of Jerusalem, reaches into the future and tells his hearers today of the salvation that is going to come; *now* Naphtali and Zebulon live in darkness, but *tomorrow* there shall be rejoicing because the burdensome yoke of the oppressor shall be broken –that’s vs 4 of our chapter– tomorrow the boots of the soldiers shall be burned –that’s vs 5– tomorrow a child shall be born who will be king on the throne of David – vs 6f. Cause in truth for rejoicing in Zebulon and Naphtali!

But now we are to note, congregation, that Isaiah makes a sudden shift. He had been talking about events in Jerusalem, foretelling that Jerusalem's future would not be pleasant because Assyria was going to attack. In that context he reminded the people of Jerusalem about Zebulon and Naphtali – they were already in exile. And as he called Naphtali and Zebulon to mind, the prophet began to speak about great joy, a joy for these two tribes, a joy because a child would be born. Yet –and here's the shift– when Isaiah speaks about the child in the context of Zebulon and Naphtali rejoicing, Isaiah suddenly speaks about “us”. For the prophet does not say in vs 6 that the child is born to Naphtali and Zebulon; that child is instead born to “us”, to the people of Jerusalem. Why this shift? The reason for that, beloved, is simply because what is true of Zebulon and Naphtali is true of Jerusalem also; Zebulon and Naphtali walk in deep darkness (they are even now in exile), but *Jerusalem walks in deep darkness too* – witness the kind of king they have, and the people tolerate it, and so Judah must surely go into exile as well (cf 8:21f): darkness!

What we have in our text then? This: to this people –Jerusalem in deep darkness because of Ahaz's apostasy and the people's tolerance of that apostasy– comes a word from God: “those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” And what is the light, the cause for joy? This, that to us a child is born. A child is born: *that, beloved, is the divine answer to the darkness enveloping Judah and Jerusalem!* Says Isaiah to all Jerusalem, in the midst of the brokenness and sins that characterize daily life in that city of God: in our dark circumstances, in our circumstances when there is no official reliance on the Lord, when we're promised that Assyria shall come back with his army and bother us again, in that situation we have this comfort from God, this reason for rejoicing: to us a child has been born! That's the answer to the darkness....

But think on it, beloved: in the context of deep darkness because of sin, in the context of exile hanging as a threat over one's head, how is the birth of a child reason for rejoicing?! In fact, in such a situation, one wishes *not* to receive a child, because that child shall certainly suffer... (cf Matthew 24:19). Yet, my beloved, that is the promise of the prophet: in their situation, the birth of a child is cause for great rejoicing!

How the birth of a child can be cause for great rejoicing? As it turns out, congregation, that depends on who the child is. That's our second point this morning:

2. Who is the child?

On this point our thoughts go immediately to the Child born in Bethlehem, Jesus Christ. The text even seems to confirm this conclusion; just look at the names listed: “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” And we're told in vs 7 that “of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end” and he shall rule forever.

Yet we do wrongly, brothers and sisters, to see here first of all a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a rule of thumb in Bible reading that one has to ask first of all how the original hearers and readers of a given passage understood that particular Word of God. What, then, did this text mean to the people of Jerusalem in Isaiah's days, a people who lived in the darkness of sin and were threatened with exile by the Assyrians?

In answer to that question, I draw your attention to the fact that Isaiah does not say to the people of Jerusalem that a child *will be* born to them; he says instead that a child *is* born. Very much on purpose does the prophet speak of completed action. Why? Which child already born does he refer to?

The reference to government and the throne of David draws our attention to the palace, specifically to its nursery. After all, God had said long ago (2 Sam 7) that David's throne would last forever. With the announcement of our text, then, the people of Jerusalem will certainly have looked at the nursery of the palace and at a child who had already been born there. We wonder, then, what

child may have been born in the palace that could be a bright light for Jerusalem?

The child involved –we heard it a couple of weeks ago too– turns out to be the young prince Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz. In the reign of Ahaz, the deep darkness of godlessness settled over the land. But, says Isaiah in our text, in the birth of Ahaz’s son, a light begins to shine over Judah again. In place of godlessness and wickedness (Isaiah prophecies), this child will bring justice and righteousness; instead of war and exile, he will bring peace and joy.

That Hezekiah was indeed the child spoken of by Isaiah in our text is demonstrated by what happened once this young prince became king. Scripture tells us that he loved the Lord. 2 Kings 18: “he did what was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done” (vs 3). And later: “after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord” (vs 5f).

Just how much of a blessing God would make of king Hezekiah is pointed up by what this young man did as soon as he became king (cf 2 Chron 29:3). Father Ahaz had nailed shut the doors of the temple, had brought into Jerusalem the idols and altars of Syria. But the first thing Hezekiah would do once he got on the throne would be that he would have the temple doors reopened, the building repaired, and sacrifices brought once more for the forgiveness of Israel’s sins. This would be the type of king God would graciously give to His people in Jerusalem, a king that would make “all the people rejoice” (2 Chronicles 29:36). Indeed, such a blessing would God have Hezekiah be that the Lord would move him to cause Israel to celebrate the Passover, something that just didn’t happen in Israel any more; you can read all about it in 2 Chronicles 30. In truth, how delightful for Judah and Jerusalem that such a child is already born! *Now* deep darkness has settled on the land, but *soon* –the child’s already born– there will be light, rejoicing, feasting, all because *God would give a man of faith!*

I’ve said already that the people would rejoice for three reasons, the first reason being vs 4, the second reason vs 5, and the third our text, vs 6. Isaiah speaks of rejoicing in vs 4 because the yoke of the enemy would be broken. That enemy was the dreaded king of Assyria and his horrible army. In the days when Hezekiah would be king, the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem, but this king would respond not in fear but in faith; he would tell his people to “be strong and courageous; do not be afraid nor dismayed before the king of Assyria, nor before all the multitude that is with him” –why not?– “for there are more with us than with him” (2 Chronicles 32:7). For this would be a pious king who would *believe* that the Lord with His hosts of angels would fight for his people. So it would happen that “the angel of the Lord went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians 185,000 [soldiers]” (2 Kings 19:35).

See there what God meant with the words of the prophet in chap 9:4. That burdensome yoke of the terrible Assyrians, the rod of the Assyrian oppressor, God would sovereignly break on His own strength, just as God had broken Midian in the days of Gideon on His own strength. And see there what God meant with the words of vs 5: the people of Jerusalem could rejoice as they gather the boots of the 185,000 Assyrian soldiers killed by the army of God, together with their garments rolled in blood, they’d rejoice as they burn them all with fire (vs 5). The next king, already born, would by the grace of God be a man of faith, and so the people of Jerusalem –now living in such darkness– would have reason for great rejoicing.

Who was the child of which Isaiah spoke? That was first of all, brothers and sisters, *not* Jesus Christ; this was first all Hezekiah the son of Ahaz. By the decree of God the government would be placed upon his shoulders, and he would rule in such a way as to be worthy of some wonderful names. He’d be a man of faith, and therefore could he give to Judah some wise advice; wonderful counsellor he’d be for his people. In his governing he would trust in God, and so God could use him as His instrument to show to all on earth that God in heaven was Mighty God (cf 2 Kings 19:19). In the

manner in which he ruled, he would show genuine care for the people entrusted to them; Hezekiah would be to Israel a Father. And Prince of Peace he'd be; because of the faith God would grant him, the Lord would bless with peace and prosperity, yes, so much so that the Scriptures can later record that "the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria, and from the hand of all others, and guided them on every side." Indeed, "many brought gifts to the Lord at Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations thereafter" (2 Chronicles 32:22f).

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace: in our chapter God announced that such glorious names would by His grace be attached to the prince already born in the nursery of king Ahaz. What a gospel for the pious in Jerusalem who now groaned under the apostasy of their godless king!

But what does this child do?? That's our third point:

3. What does the child do?

Here, beloved, is the tragedy of the glorious promise concerning pious Hezekiah. He could mean so much for the people of God in Jerusalem, could be for a wonderful counsellor, a real Father to his nation, a prince of peace. But *he remained a sinful man*. After he had ruled for a number of years, Hezekiah became proud, self-reliant. You know what happened when envoys came from Babylon; instead of drawing their attention to the Lord God of Israel, Hezekiah showed off to these envoys all his wealth and all his might. So God's wrath came upon him and upon Jerusalem. But because Hezekiah humbled himself again, together with his people, the wrath of the Lord was not poured out upon Judah in the days of Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 32:25f). After he died, not many decades passed before the Babylonians dragged the people of Judah off into exile.

Yes, Hezekiah was a light, shining in a dark place. But this light was still sinful, and therefore doomed to go out. Indeed, even the names Isaiah mentions for the born child do not completely cover Hezekiah; everlasting Father he surely wasn't, if only because he died. And as it turned out, there did come an end to the increase of his government and of peace; Hezekiah's sin was his downfall. At his death his son Manasseh reigned in his stead, and of Manasseh it was said that he seduced Judah and Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel (2 Kings 21:9). Under this king, Judah once more walked in deep darkness, experienced once more the burdensome yoke of the oppressor, heard again the boots of the tramping warriors.... For sin had dominion over the people again....

But the prophecy of Isaiah still stood: to us who live in darkness a child is born, a child of whose government there is no end. And it is true: this Child was not born till some 700 years later. But when the time had fully come, born He surely was. The people who lived in darkness, enveloped by the night of sin, were made to see a great light; said Jesus of Himself: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). And though the yoke of sin's burden, and the rod of Satan's oppression weighed heavily on the people, Jesus Christ broke that yoke, broke that rod of oppression as on the day of Midian; as God defeated the Midianites single-handedly, without any real help on the part of Gideon, so Jesus Christ single-handedly broke the yoke of sin on Calvary, destroyed the rod of Satan's oppression on Golgotha by Himself. And the result of it all was that Satan and all his demonic tramping warriors are cast into the bottomless pit, that pit of eternal fire, there to have their boots and garments reserved as fuel for the flames that are never quenched....

Christ triumphed on Calvary, and the Child born in Bethlehem received a seat at God's right hand, there to be crowned Lord of all, Mighty God. For Jesus' sake has God become everlasting Father for His people; today even we are safe in His paternal hands. And on the day of Pentecost, Christ poured out His Spirit, that other Counsellor, that wonderful Counsellor who leads the redeemed into

all the truth. In a word, Jesus Christ has made Himself to be the Prince of Peace, with as result that we are delivered from Satan, are reconciled to God, may be at peace always....

And will Christ's dominion end? Isaiah spoke of there being no end to His government and to His peace. 2000 years ago, Christ was elevated to the throne of the universe, and Lord of the universe He still is today. Today He establishes peace on the earth, for His Word of redemption continues to go out to people in bondage to sin and Satan. Indeed, the day comes, comes soon, when He will come once again to cleanse this earth of all opposition, and so be recognised by one and all as eternal king, king of justice and of righteousness....

Judah in the days of our chapter lived in thick darkness because of the unbelief of king Ahaz. How they would rejoice, though, with joy unspeakable, when the Lord would bless the faith of their next king with the destruction of those 185,000 soldiers of the Assyrians!! And rejoice they certainly did! *How much more, beloved, how much more would there be reason for rejoicing when the Child would be born in Bethlehem who by His faith in God would crush the seed of the serpent!* And great rejoicing there was; the angels filled the heavens with their sinless song:

“Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).

The shepherds joined in the rejoicing; after visiting the stable they returned to their sheep “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen” (Lu 2:20). Christmas: light has shined in a world darkened by sin, and therefore is Christmas in truth the time to *rejoice!*

And we, we live again so many years after the first Christmas. That in turn means that we have seen fulfilled all the wonderful promises spoken of old concerning the baby Jesus; we live after Christmas, after Calvary, after Christ has broken the yoke of Satan's burden and the rod of sin's oppression, we live after Christ has banned the devil and his demons from heaven and after Christ has bound the devil so that he cannot do on earth what he'd like to do. We live after the Child has been elevated to the position of Lord of all, after the evidence is in that this Child is Wonderful Counsellor indeed, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, after it has been demonstrated that of the increase of His government and of peace there shall be no end, after it has been proven that His reign is one of justice and of righteousness. And all of that together means, dearly beloved, that we have much, much more cause for rejoicing at the memory of the birth of this Child than did the people of Jerusalem in the days of Isaiah; more, we have much, much more cause for rejoicing at the memory of the birth of this Child than did the angels in the fields of Bethlehem and the shepherds when they returned to the flocks. God has granted that the delightful promise concerning Christmas as prophesied in our text has come to pass, and so we can rejoice today with joy unlimited – despite the concerns and sorrows that characterize this broken life!

That God has given that eternal Son to take away the sin of the world: it's a shaft of brilliant light piercing the darkness and giving hope in the brokenness that characterises this life of sorrows. Let there be, then, my brothers and sisters, a joy unbounded today, a joy rooted in hearty thanksgiving for the marvel God has wrought for us who lived in darkest night. And the concerns that characterize this life: let them recede to the background as we focus on the Child that God in mercy has given.

That's what Christmas is all about – and this is the gospel by which we live in this broken life, the gospel we all confess again and again. This gospel gives to you too, Josh, so very much encouragement.